

# BEING AN ACTIVE BYSTANDER

## STRATEGIES FOR CHALLENGING THE EMERGENCE OF BIAS

---

THE KIRWAN INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF RACE & ETHNICITY | AUTHOR: LENA TENNEY

---

*“When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak.” –Audre Lorde*

Thank you for your commitment to challenging explicit and implicit bias. It can be difficult to know what to say when a family member, friend, colleague, acquaintance, or stranger makes problematic comments. However, we will only be able to dismantle oppression in its overt forms if we are brave enough to challenge bias in even its most common forms. The Kirwan Institute invites you to utilize these strategies to empower yourself to speak out in response to bias.

Individuals can be active bystanders when faced with the emergence of bias in interpersonal interactions. These suggestions encompass a variety of approaches to opening a conversation about bias. There is not a one-size-fits-all solution to challenging every manifestation of bias. Consider which strategy or strategies might be most effective based upon situational context, as well as your own strengths.

There is a difference between calling someone in (inviting continued discussion and learning) and calling someone out (shutting down the conversation). Both approaches are valid, yet might be more or less effective in various circumstances. The goals of these strategies are to educate people and invite them to do better, rather than to criticize or ostracize them, thereby addressing the situation while avoiding making the person defensive.

### Strategies for Speaking Out

---

- **Use humor.**
  - “What are you?” “Human! How about you?”
  - “Your English is so good!” “I should hope so since it’s the language I’ve been speaking my entire life!”
- **Be literal or refuse to rely on the assumption being made.**
  - “Let’s powwow!” “I don’t think we have time to plan a whole powwow, but I’m willing to have a quick meeting.”
  - “That’s just the way those people are, you know?” “Actually I don’t know what you mean by that. I’ve met a lot of people in that group and they’re all unique individuals.”
  - “I don’t get the joke. Can you explain it to me?”
- **Ask questions that invite discussion.**
  - “What do you mean when you say that?”



- “Do you know what that phrase actually means and where it came from? Most people have no idea that it actually has an offensive origin/meaning.”
- “Can you explain your thought process to me? I want to be sure I understand how we reached such different conclusions.”
- **State that you are uncomfortable.**
  - “That phrase makes me uncomfortable. Could you please not use it around me?”
  - “Assumptions about an entire group of people make me uncomfortable. I don’t think that we can take that assumption for granted or make our decisions based off of it.”
- **Create a conversation speedbump.**
  - “I’m not an expert, but my understanding is that that language is outdated. Does anyone know what might be a better way to phrase that? If not, I’ll try to Google it.”
  - “I’m not sure what I think about that. I’m going to have to think about that more.”
  - “I don’t know how I feel about that...”
  - “Ouch!” “Whoa!” “Excuse me?!” or “Seriously?!”
- **Use direct communication.**
  - “That kind of language is not appropriate in the workplace.”
  - “When we say that people who are nearing retirement shouldn’t be promoted to this position because they might not be as dedicated at this point in their career, I worry we aren’t being fair to older employees. That assumption doesn’t take into account every individual’s circumstances and work ethic, so can we please make sure we aren’t relying on it when deciding who to consider for the position?”
  - “I know you aren’t intending to stereotype anyone, but as your friend I wanted to let you know that what you said could easily be interpreted that way. Since I know you’re a good person who cares about others, I would hate for you to accidentally say it again without realizing how it can come across.”
- **Remind people of personal and/or institutional values.**
  - “I know you want to be an ally, and that’s exactly why I wanted to check in about your comment. I know I would want someone to tell me if I accidentally messed up.”
  - “You’re new so maybe you haven’t been told yet, but we don’t talk about women like that here.”
  - “Clearly we have different personal opinions about this topic. Regardless, the handbook/code of conduct/non-discrimination policy does say that we do not discriminate/treat people differently/talk like that.”
- **Remove yourself from the conversation.**
  - “This conversation is no longer productive, so I am ending it.”
  - “We have this same fight every holiday gathering. Clearly we’re not going to change each other’s minds. I won’t agree to disagree because people’s humanity is too important for that, but I will ask that we not have this fight right now. Can we please enjoy family time together instead?”

### Additional Resources

- 
- Engage with the virtual training, “Did They Really Just Say That?! Being an Active Bystander”
    - <http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/active-bystander-training/>