

## Be an Active Bystander

You're hosting the annual dinner meeting between your board of directors and the community advisory committee when your board treasurer comments that the newest members of the committee "certainly help us meet our diversity quotas, so we won't have to worry about adding anymore 'mommies' to the board for awhile." Or following the end of the fiscal year report by the African-born CFO, your program director, in a well-intentioned attempt to offer "praise" tells him, "Nobody can say you're an affirmative action hire."

You're shocked and embarrassed, and you know you should say or do something. You also know that this behavior, whether born of malice or ignorance, can derail any chance of building further cohesiveness as a team. The problem is you just aren't sure how to intercede in a way that is productive.

According to three Boston diversity experts, including TSNE's Tyra Sidberry, you can react constructively to incidents of bias in the workplace as an "active bystander." TSNE and the Center for Gender in Organizations (CGO), part of the Simmons College School of Management, first came together in 2004 to introduce "Tools for Institutional Change," concrete ways to combat bias as an active bystander, to Boston's nonprofit community.

Since that time, the partners have trained two dozen diversity consultants, trainers and coaches to facilitate the development of active bystander skills in hundreds of nonprofit staff, and, CGO's added focus, corporate employees.

### Making Room for Silenced Voices

According to CGO's Stacey Blake-Beard, Ph.D. and Maureen Scully, Ph.D., when a coworker witnesses another staffer devaluing diversity, the coworker/active bystander can speak up, make room for silenced voices, halt a painful escalation, steer everyone away from the "blame game," and sustain and increase respect for diversity in the workplace. An understanding of the constructive role that a bystander can play grew out of psychological research done at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Sloan School of Management.

"As a bystander, you want to show that everybody owns this situation," explains Dr. Scully, faculty affiliate at CGO and assistant professor in management at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. She was one of the Sloan School faculty which developed video vignettes that illustrate actual cases of bias in workforce interaction as part of the Professional Conduct Project.

### Taking the First Step

Tools for Institutional Change begins with a provocative question: Is being a bystander just a bit better than nothing at all? To determine their individual response, workshop participants watch videos based on real-life situations that took place at MIT during the 1990s. In one series of vignettes, three soon-to-graduate MBA students, including one female student, are meeting with a recruiter. The recruiter repeatedly ignores the female student, who attempts to take part in the conversation. In actuality, she is the most qualified candidate for the position his company is offering.

Unknown to the candidates, the recruiter's bias leads him to assume that the woman is the wife of one of the MBA candidates. He only includes the woman and realizes how well-qualified she is for the position after one of the male candidates assumes the role of active bystander. As an active bystander, he introduces the woman by name, and pleasantly but firmly uses another opening in the conversation to interject a comment about her experience. This provides an opening for the woman to tout her experience herself.

According to Dr. Blake-Beard, associate professor at Simmons School of Management and research faculty at CGO, the most important "take-away" for anyone in the role of bystander is that you don't have to be an expert or feel that you have to have all of the answers to act when you see bias in the workplace.

"You simply need to move people away from debate mode," she advises, "and toward inquiry and action." She adds a caution, however. There may be times when we deem the cost too high to intercede. Certainly, we have to think carefully about our physical safety at all times. But more often than not, we can simply acknowledge that the situation has transpired and then:

- \* Assume personal responsibility.
- \* Decide what to do.
- \* Then just do it.

"Civil courage is the antidote to bystander apathy," Dr. Blake-Beard explains. "You can't let it go because of the damage it will do to you when you don't act."

And Blake-Beard, Scully and Sidberry all agree that helping employees learn how to intervene when they see bias in the workplace can strengthen individuals, teams and the organization. They recommend the following techniques.

#### Some Techniques Used by Effective Bystanders

1. Recognize the situation for what is and actively acknowledge it.
2. Show that everyone owns the situation, not just the offender and offended parties.
3. Move the conversation from debate to inquiry and then action.
  - \* Too often the parties are stuck in debate mode about what has transpired, with the offender insisting that the offended party simply misunderstood or misinterpreted the situation.
4. If the offended party is being ignored, as in the case of the female MIT student:
  - \* Use his/her name
  - \* Turn your body toward him/her
  - \* Make a conversational segue
5. Take a tempered, learning stance:
  - \* Ask a clarifying question
  - \* Validate a controversial position
  - \* Suggest help or action from a third party
6. Go for the small win that makes a difference
7. Realize that you can't change everything in one instance.

By using the tools offered in “Tools for Institutional Change,” anyone can become an active bystander and avoid the role of judge, avenger, fixer or hero/heroine. He or she will instead be a stakeholder and facilitator in creating a diverse and welcoming workplace.

Learn more about other initiatives of the Diversity Initiative.

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