

How to be an Ally: Avoid Common Dialogue Pitfalls

A. Avoid Common Dialogue Pitfalls

1. PLEs ~ Perfectly Logical Explanations
2. Yea, but....
3. That happens to me/my group, too....
4. I know someone who...and they don't agree with you....
5. I don't see it that way; therefore, it doesn't really happen....
6. That doesn't happen to me...(so it doesn't exist)
7. Don't you think that...
8. You're overreacting...you're too sensitive...
9. He/she's a good person...they never meant to do that....
10. That was not my intent! You misunderstood me!

B. Be Aware of Cumulative Impact

This concept occurs when a subordinated group member experiences repeated negative oppressive incidents, either in a short period of time or over a long period. Their feelings of anger, fear, distrust, frustration, etc., may build up and then they might “over-react” and respond out of cumulative impact for a number of reasons, including:

- it is not safe for them to challenge the people who treated them negatively

- they are tired of intervening and trying to educate others

A good ally understands that many subordinated group members may be carrying the cumulative impact of a long series of negative treatment. If they seem irritated or unusually upset, the ally tries to not take it personally, but instead, tries to offer support to the subordinated group member by:

- acknowledging the degree of feelings the subordinated group member is experiencing
- offering to listen to stories of how the person has been negatively treated (without interrupting, arguing, justifying, or trying to “give advice” and “fix it”)
- asking if there is anything they can do to be supportive

C. Recognize Intent and Impact

When a member of a dominant group says/does something hurtful or inappropriate, their tendency is to want to EXPLAIN their INTENT (*I didn't mean it! It was just a joke! I didn't do it on purpose...*). However, the pain and hurt, the IMPACT, is still very real to the subordinated group members. A good ALLY first acknowledges their impact, apologizes, and asks to hear more about how they have negatively impacted the subordinated group member. And then asks how they can help, be supportive, make amends, avoid similar transgressions in the future, etc.

D. Recognize Varying Levels of Differential Risk and Credibility

It is important that all people, subordinated and dominant group members, work to intervene and stop oppression wherever they see it. AND dominant group members are generally given more credibility, listened to more seriously, and have fewer risks when they intervene, as compared to members of subordinated groups. A good ally consistently recognizes opportunities to speak up and intervene, knowing that it is their responsibility to take action, regardless of the risks involved.

E. Recognize and Use your Discretionary Power

All people have some personal power, and possibly position power from which to speak up and intervene. They have the discretion/the choice of when or how or if to intervene. Dominant/dominant group members tend to have MORE discretionary power, given how often they are in positions of authority, and because of the greater credibility they have in society.

F. Distinguishing Behavior

Most dominant group members will be perceived as “just another man...white...” When dominant group members speak up and intervene, they DISTINGUISH themselves from the overall dominant group who generally both consciously and unconsciously perpetuate oppression.

G. Intervening in Oppressive Situations

Good allies take the initiative to try to STOP inappropriate behaviors and situations. They then look for ways to EDUCATE the person(s) who made the comment/took the action, in hopes that they may learn why what they did was harmful, and to not repeat it in the future. Allies also offer SUPPORT to the target of the negative treatment when possible.

Tools and Tips: Responding in Cross-Cultural Conflicts

A. Responding to Common Dialogue Blockers

1. Another way to view it is...

There may be a number of factors that contributed to this situation....

Response

- *When you say that, I feel you're discounting my experience. In that situation I felt...*
- *It sounds like you are having a hard time believing that this situation could be true. Why is that? Have you ever had something happen to you and someone who wasn't there or is not a member of your identity group didn't believe you or discounted your experience? How did that make you feel?*
- *What would it mean if this was really a case of bias?*

2. Yea, but....

Response

- *What do you think the impact on me is when you say that?*
- *You may not have intended this, but when you give a “YEA, BUT” I feel discounted and that you have dismissed my perspective and experience.*
- *I'm curious what you were hoping to communicate with that statement?*
- *Honestly, I'm rather upset about what happened. And I can't hear your perspective right now. What I need is for someone to just listen to me and acknowledge what I experienced and am feeling....*
- *I'm curious why you chose to give me a “Yea, But” just then?*

3. That happens to me/my group, too....

Response

- *This dynamic/situation does happen to other groups, too. The difference might be HOW OFTEN it happens to them, and WHY it happens to them. For instance: most white folks have received bad customer service. It rarely happens to them because someone has prejudice towards them because of their race. And it probably doesn't happen to them as frequently.*
- *How does it feel when it happens to you? How often does that happen? Why does it happen to you? So you have a “window of understanding” to connect to what I and my group experience much of the time.*

4. I know someone who...and they don't agree with you....

Response

- *There might be some people who don't see this as I do. That doesn't discount my experience or perception.*
- *Not all ____ may feel like I do. And, unfortunately, there are many who do agree with me and have had very similar experiences. It sounds like you are having a hard time being open to hearing about my experience? Why is that?*

5. I don't see it that way...(therefore, it doesn't really happen....) or That doesn't happen to me...(so it doesn't exist)

Response

- *You might not have ever recognized this dynamic before or seen it happen, but does that mean it can't be true for others?*
- *I'm glad and hopeful that it doesn't. And hope you never do experience this. And this is what happened to me, and I've heard many other folks describe all too similar experiences...*
- *It might not, or you may not notice it happening to you....but here's what I've tracked and noticed in my life....*

6. Don't you think that...

Response

- *I'm wondering if you have a statement behind your question....*
- *Do you have a specific example that illustrates what you're trying to ask or say?*

8. You're overreacting...you're too sensitive...

Response

- *You may not agree, but I feel very strongly about this. I find your comment really dismissive and it sounds like it's really hard for you to hear what I am saying. What's coming up for you and why are you reacting in this way?*
- *When you say that, it makes me want to end the conversation and never talk to you about these serious issues again. Are you aware/do you care about the impact of that statement?*
- *Your intent might be to try to help or support me, but the impact of that statement is infuriating. It makes me feel like you are completely dismissing my experience-why?*

9. He/she's a good person...they never meant to do that....

Response

- *Many "good people" do very inappropriate and harmful things.*
- *Regardless of the intent, this was the impact of their actions....*
- *I'm not questioning if they're good or bad, I'm talking about the impact of their actions.*

10. That was not my intent! You misunderstood me!

Response

- *I'm open to hearing your intent, but I'd first appreciate your acknowledgment of the impact of your comment/actions....*
- *What was your intent....I hear your intent was _____, and I hope you can also realize the impact was different than what you intended.*

11. That had nothing to do with _____ (an "ism")!! It's just their personality!

Response

- *How do you know? What leads you to that conclusion?*
- *That may be what you believe, and I have observed/experienced this type of situation so many times..Here's the way I see it...*

Adapted from:

1. Hale, F. W. (2004). *What makes racial diversity work in higher education: Academic leaders present successful policies and strategies*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Pub.
2. *Turn the Tide: Rise Above Toxic, Difficult Situations in the Workplace*: <https://drkathyobear.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Turn-the-Tide-Kathy-Obear.pdf>

Power Mapping Using an Inclusion Lens

How does power operate in organizational/group/institutional settings?

1. **Influence:** highly involved in social networks (it's not what you know, it's who you know)
 - personal strength and conviction,
 - the sharing of airtime--both in who is speaking, how they are speaking (verbal acuity, English proficiency, asking questions vs. sharing personal stories),
 - how often they are speaking and for how long
2. **Control:** formal authority through identities (age, race, gender, etc.) or roles (such as supervisors/directors)
3. **Capacity:** access to resources, such as knowledge of social systems, money, time for thoughtful reflection, etc.

Questions to consider when using an inclusion lens to identify how power is operating in the group: Use the following prompts to observe and identify group dynamics. Based on the questions, chart your position of power within this group and on campus.

1. What differences are present in the group? Which group memberships and how many from various groups?
2. Who has credibility? Whose words and ideas are listened to with most attention and respect?
3. Who do people look at when they are talking?
4. Who has eye contact with whom while others are talking?
5. Who is treated with full respect?
6. Who talks most at meetings?
7. Whose voices are heard?
8. Who is quiet or doesn't speak as often as others?
9. How are people reacting nonverbally?
10. Who initiates the topics?
11. What ideas are brought up? By whom?
12. Whose ideas are given importance? Whose ideas don't get much discussion?
13. Whose ideas are discounted? Or "plop" without comment?
14. Who interrupts others? Who gets interrupted? Who is never interrupted?
15. How and when does the tone and energy of the conversation shift and change?
16. How much air-time do people take?
17. Whose experience is valued?
18. How do decisions get made?
19. Who has access to or is given important information?
20. Who is in authority?
21. Who engages in side conversations?
22. Who brings up issues of respect and inclusion?
23. How do people respond when different issues of inclusion are raised?
24. What issues of inclusion and respect are not being brought up or discussed?
25. As you notice interpersonal dynamics that are not inclusive, who intervenes to shift the dynamics? Who doesn't?
26. As you observe exclusionary comments and actions, wonder: Is this an isolated incident or a possible common pattern of experience?
27. Who is assigned to or expected to take on background roles?
28. Who cleans up?
29. Who makes decisions?