

Tool: Communication Approaches to Address Implicit Bias and Microinequities

General Principles for Respectful Communication:

- Separate the person from the action or behavior. Instead of saying “you’re racist”, try saying “that could be perceived as insulting to members of particular racial groups.” Being called a racist puts someone on the defensive and can be considered “fighting words.”
- How you say something is as critical as what you say, e.g., tone of voice, body language, etc. The message has to be conveyed with respect for the other person, even if one is having a strong negative reaction to what’s been said. So it is helpful to think about your intention when interrupting a microinequity—e.g., do you want the person to understand the impact of their action, or stop the behavior, or do you want to blame the person, etc. Your intention and the manner in which you execute your intention make a difference.
- Avoid starting questions with “why”—it puts people on the defensive. Instead use “how” or “what made you ….”
- When addressing a microinequity, try to avoid using the pronoun “you” too often—it can leave people feeling defensive and blamed. Use “I” statements describing the impact on you instead or refer to the action indirectly.

Communication Approaches: The communication approaches are most effective when used in combination with one another, e.g., using impact and preference statements, using inquiry and paraphrasing together, etc.

INQUIRE

Ask the speaker to elaborate. This will give you more information about where they are coming from, and may also help the speaker to become aware of what they are saying.

Example: A faculty member says in a review meeting, “I think it’s great that she’s got these high-impact journals on here but all those articles are about diversity issues. I would like to see some more focused research.” *Possible response:* “I’m not clear what you mean by ‘more focused’ research, can you elaborate?”

PHRASES TO USE IN ADDRESSING THE SITUATION:

- “Say more about that.”
- “Can you elaborate on your point?”
- “It sounds like you have a strong opinion about this. Tell me why.”
- “What is it about this that concerns you the most?”

PARAPHRASE/REFLECT

Reflecting in one’s own words the essence of what the speaker has said. Paraphrasing demonstrates understanding and reduces defensiveness of both you and the speaker. Restate briefly in your own words, rather than simply parroting the speaker.

Example: Someone says the following to an African-American man: “Calm down. You don’t have to get so angry; we’re just having a discussion.” *Possible response:* “It appears you were uncomfortable when ___ said that. I’m thinking that there are many styles to express ourselves. How we can be respectful of all styles of expression—can we talk about that?”

PHRASES TO USE IN ADDRESSING THE SITUATION:

- “So, it sounds like you think…”
- “You’re saying… You believe…”

REFRAME

Create a different way to look at a situation.

Examples: You notice that your female colleague is being frequently interrupted during a committee meeting. *Possible response:* “_____ brings up a good point. I didn’t get a chance to hear all of it. Can _____ repeat it?” Someone says the following to a woman of color: “I would have never guessed that you were a scientist.” *Possible response:* “Hmmm…that’s interesting. What are the images you think of when you picture a scientist?”

PHRASES TO USE IN ADDRESSING THE SITUATION:

- “What would happen if…”
- “Could there be another way to look at this…”
- “Let’s reframe this…”
- “How would you feel if this happened to your_____?”

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USE IMPACT AND “I” STATEMENTS

A clear, nonthreatening way to directly address these issues is to focus on oneself rather than on the other person. It communicates the impact of a situation while avoiding blaming or accusing the other and reduces defensiveness.

Example: Hearing someone say, “That’s so gay.” *Possible response:* “When I hear that remark, I’m offended, because I feel that it marginalizes an entire group of people that I work with.”

PHRASE TO USE IN ADDRESSING THE SITUATION:

- “I felt _____ (feelings) when you said or did _____ (comment or behavior), and it ____ (describe the impact on you).”

USE PREFERENCE STATEMENTS

Clearly communicating one’s preferences rather than stating them as demands or having others guess what is needed.

Examples: A woman is talked over by others at a meeting. *One possible response:* “I would like to participate, but I need you to let me finish my thought.” Making a racist, sexist or homophobic joke. *Possible response:* “I don’t think this was funny. I would like you to stop.”

PHRASES TO USE IN ADDRESSING THE SITUATION:

- “What I’d like is…”
- “It would be helpful to me if…”

RE-DIRECT

Shift the focus to a different person or topic. (Particularly helpful when someone is asked to speak for his/her entire race, cultural group, etc.)

Example: “She’s spending too much time doing ‘diversity work’.” *Possible response:* “I’d like more clarification on what you mean and would also like to invite others to weigh in.”

PHRASES TO USE IN ADDRESSING THE SITUATION:

- “Let’s shift the conversation…”
- “Let’s open up this question to others…”

USE STRATEGIC QUESTIONS

A strategic question creates energy for change, broadens options, and dislodges old thought patterns and assumptions. It is framed in a way to identify values and ideals, consider alternatives, and move one from the present to a more ideal situation. A strategic question can lead to transformation, and is particularly useful in problem-solving, change efforts, and addressing conflict.

Example: A faculty member says in a search committee meeting: “Gender plays no part in who we hire.” *Possible response:* “I agree that gender should not play a role. How might we examine our implicit bias and our review process to ensure that gender plays no part in this and that we have a fair process? What can we agree to?”

PHRASES TO USE IN ADDRESSING THE SITUATION:

- “What would allow you to…?”
- “What could you do differently…?”
- “What would happen if you considered the impact on…?”

REVISIT

Even if the moment of a microinequity has passed, go back and address it. Research indicates that an unaddressed microinequity can leave just as much of a negative impact as the microinequity itself.

Example: In the lab, an adviser asks a female student if she is planning to have children while in postdoctoral training. *Possible response to the adviser:* “I wanted to go back to a question you asked _____ yesterday about her plans for a family. I’m wondering what made you ask that question and what message it might have sent to her.” *Possible response to the student:* “I heard what your advisor said to you yesterday. I thought it was inappropriate and I just wanted to check in with you.”

PHRASES TO USE IN ADDRESSING THE SITUATION:

- “I want to go back to something that was brought up in our conversation/meeting/class …”
- “Let’s rewind _____ minutes…”
- “Let’s step back for a minute and look at what’s going on/what was just said…”