Some Notes on Peers and Bystanders within Organizations and “Communities,” with Respect to Behavior Seen to be Unacceptable

Abstract

After most unfortunate—or terrible—events, the daily papers remind us that “someone usually knew” of problematic behavior by the perpetrator before the event. Scholarly research affirms the point.¹

It is evident that peers and bystanders can sometimes make a major difference within organizations and “communities”—in a wide variety of ways. Examples are easy to find:

- An alert custodian coming in to clean a building might notice some unusual trash, or see an unexpected visitor at night, and prevent criminal behavior.
- A representative for an organization might deter a member from misdirecting organizational funds, or engaging in other unacceptable behavior, on a trip.
- A support staff person might arrange in a quiet, professional way to interrupt or re-focus a supervisor or co-worker as that person begins a violent tirade against another employee—or an outsider.
- An information system employee might become concerned about the integrity of a fellow employee (and the relevant IT system) and quietly seek advice from IT security experts.
- A skilled laborer might notice unsafe or anti-social behavior at a work site and quickly mitigate or prevent effects from the “error,” while thinking things through.
- Someone might find that the name of a candidate was left off a promotion list, and suggest a new corrected list, remediating an error that might have originated in conscious animus or unconscious bias against a person of different race or religion.
- An administrator or community member or leader might suspect wrongdoing or an egregious error—by a peer, customer, employee or vendor—and take steps to stop or report the behavior.

Bystander actions are important for many reasons. The reactions of peers and bystanders who perceive unacceptable behavior can “swing” group behavior early on. Bystanders may foster or collude with further unacceptable behavior. Alternatively, they may take informal action against the unacceptable behavior, or make a report². What peers and bystanders decide to do may add to a destructive—or responsible—climate in a community or organization.

² See Appendix One for some examples.
Many people hesitate, much of the time, in the face of unacceptable behavior. Except in sudden, dangerous emergencies—when some people may help instinctively, without consciously thinking about it—people often hesitate before acting on the spot, or reporting behavior they perceive to be unacceptable. There are many reasons why people may think hard about whether they will help.

On the other hand, there are many reasons why people do act or report responsibly. With respect to both inaction, and action, the reasons are best understood by thinking of bystander action as a process that occurs in a context, in this case in the context of an organization. The bystander process proceeds from:

1) perceiving behavior that may be unacceptable, to
2) assessing the behavior, and then
3) judging whether action is required, and
4) deciding whether and how to make a particular personal response (or responses).

The fourth step may be especially complex. Often there are many options. For example, some bystanders will engage personally and informally, to prevent, interrupt or stop unacceptable behavior, but not (at least initially) be willing to make a formal report. Some may only be willing to make a formal report, or may be willing to report in just one particular way. Some peers and bystanders may not act at all.

The context for the “bystander process” will almost certainly influence what the bystander will do. Context will be especially important before the bystander process begins, and also toward the end of the process. The setting in which unacceptable behavior first occurs, the people involved, and recent events are part of the opening context. The context toward the end of the process includes the resources—and options—that appear to the bystander to be available, and his or her perceptions of peers, the people in charge, and other authorities.

Those who are interested in fostering responsible behavior by peers and bystanders have many opportunities to influence the context—and every step—of the process. Happily enough, success in this endeavor may build on success. Known success by one responsible bystander may influence the behavior of the next bystander if it becomes known in the organization or community.

Some Notes on Bystanders

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3 See again Appendix One.
Bystanders serve an important function in society by preventing, re-focusing, interrupting, mitigating, stopping, remediating and reporting unacceptable behavior. However, many people hesitate, much of the time, in the face of unacceptable behavior. People often think hard, before taking any personal action. They may decide not to take any action about behavior that they perceive to be unacceptable.4

These notes review some of the many reasons bystanders give, as to why they hesitate, and the (fewer) reasons they give as to why they have taken responsible action.

Some long-standing research about bystander inaction focused on the so-called “bystander effect.”5 This often-cited “effect” is thought to explain why individual bystanders sometimes have not acted in a particular (relatively rare) event. Much research has focused on single-incident, dangerous emergencies, in public, with strangers. The traditional research often focused on one or two bystander actions: typically physical intervention and/or reporting to authorities.

The apparent failure to take responsible action in such emergencies is often attributed to a particular barrier, namely, “diffusion of responsibility.” The effect is thought to be stronger when there are more rather than fewer bystanders.

As it happens, the particular, often-touted “effect” is not a universal truth about bystanders. For one thing, in real life, there are dozens of reasons why bystanders do not act, not just one.6 There also are many reasons why bystanders do take responsible action, and it turns out that they do so in many different ways. And finally, even in (stereotypical) single-incident, dangerous, public emergencies with groups of people, the famous “bystander effect” does not always occur.7

In everyday life bystanders do frequently act, responsibly and helpfully. They do so in many informal ways, as well as reporting unacceptable behavior to authorities. For example, a major study in Nature8 illuminated a wide variety of actions taken by scientists who saw problematic behavior in labs. (The study was done in institutions funded by US agencies.) Notably some of the positive action was attributed to the fact that these scientists belong to “scientific communities,” as well as to their organization. That is, studies illuminate the fact that a

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6 Rowe, Wilcox and Gadlin, op.cit.
bystander may be influenced by several different “contexts,” at the same time that he or she observes unacceptable behavior. The bystander may think of the behavior in terms of family, faith, friends, cultural traditions, and group norms—as well as considering the immediate situation and organizational rules.

In recent times a number of institutions, including the armed services, have provided focused training, to encourage responsible bystander behavior. There is a wide literature on preventing safety problems that emphasizes the importance of bystander reporting. There are new initiatives in public and private institutions and associations around the world, to help to prevent “insider threats.” Bullying and sexual assault are the focus of many programs in organizations and communities.9 “Friends don’t let friends drive drunk” is an example of a well-known attempt—in society at large—to encourage peers and bystanders to prevent drunken driving. “See something—say something” is another bystander program focused on the general public.

My own organization has had intermittent bystander training about unacceptable behavior for three decades. Programs have focused on various topics, including harassment, diversity, alcohol use, integrity in management education, dealing with the fear of violence, safety, research integrity and team behavior.

In almost every situation, and despite training, here and there, to act responsibly in the face of unacceptable behavior, it is clear that more bystanders could be more helpful more often. As far as one can tell from dozens of everyday articles and newspaper reports, many people in every culture still hesitate to act, in a wide variety of situations, when they see unacceptable behavior.10

There are of course wonderful exceptions, as when some individuals react intuitively and instantaneously in dangerous emergency situations.11 However, many employees, students, community members—and leaders—have learned, long since, that sticking their necks out may have bad consequences. People typically fear a wide variety of bad consequences.

It turns out that there are many bumps in the road, and sometimes side trips, as a bystander does or does not proceed to taking action.12 Most bystander behavior is not just one “act;” it is, rather, a process. A bystander may or may not

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10 As just one example, see "Bullying and the Peer Group: A review," Christina Salmivalli, Aggression and Violent Behavior 15 (2010) 112–120. It extensively reviews the literature on bullying among children, concluding that children, as well as adults, generally hesitate more often than acting, to stop bullying.
11 Instantaneous actions of this sort—like jumping to save a child who falls from a subway platform—may be what Professor Daniel Kahneman would characterize as “System One” actions that occur faster than “conscious” decisions can occur. (Daniel Kahneman, Thinking, Fast and Slow, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011.)
12 See for example, a review of research studies by Christopher Colvin, "An Exploratory Study of the Fundamental Characteristics Influencing the Analysis and Communication Activities of Health Care Incident Reporting Systems," Masters Thesis, University of Toronto, 2011, and the ombudsman practitioners’ study by Mary Rowe, Linda Wilcox and Howard Gadlin, op.cit.
progress beyond step one, and also may go back and forth—from step to step and within a step. We look first at factors that inhibit action. We then examine points that may help in designing effective programs to encourage responsible bystanders. We begin with four sets of common problems:

One: The bystander does not “see” unacceptable behavior

- An employee, manager or community member working in a new environment may not know enough about the work—or the rules—to think about a particular behavior as unacceptable; he or she may not even notice that it occurred.

- A skilled worker becomes habituated to many kinds of odd behavior that happen very frequently in her workplace—or she is too absorbed to notice unacceptable behavior, because she is focusing on something else.\(^\text{13}\)

- “Motivational blindness” blocks a manager traveling on business—or a family member or friend of a perpetrator—from noticing inhumane behavior. (The manager or the family member may know intuitively—below the level of conscious thought—that it is not safe or advantageous to “see” this behavior; the behavior is therefore not observed or remembered.)\(^\text{14}\)

- A technical expert or tradesperson, who moves from one organization to another, forgets ephemeral glimpses of unacceptable behavior by a particular host, in part because the behavior comes and goes very quickly.

- A lower-level employee or community member successfully avoids being in the presence of certain unacceptable behavior by a higher-up, without consciously thinking about it.

Two: The bystander cannot or does not judge the behavior

- An employee, manager or community member from a background that is “non-traditional” for the given environment takes notice, but does not know how to judge the problematic behavior.\(^\text{15}\)

- A first level supervisor thinks, “There probably is not much of a problem here,” because the problematic behavior is sporadic; he also does not have a clear idea about what was happening before he came to the organization or community, and what the customs are.

- The apparent perpetrator is highly placed, like a senior leader, or a visiting consultant who seems to have a right to act unconventionally; the observer thinks, “My judgment must be wrong.”

\(^\text{14}\) Max H. Bazerman and Ann Tenbrunsel use this term in Blind Spots: Why We Fail to Do What’s Right and What to Do about It, Princeton University Press, 2011.
\(^\text{15}\) It is very common in all organizations and communities that managers, employees and community members may not know or understand all the laws, regulations and policies relevant to unacceptable behavior.
• The apparent perpetrators are co-workers or community members who joined at about the same time; a puzzled bystander thinks, “This must be OK, the others are all doing it.”

• The apparent perpetrators are family members or community members or in-group members; the problematic behavior goes on and on and nothing bad seems to be happening; the bystander tries not to be “judgmental.”

• A bystander in an isolated building is expected by the few people around her to go along with problematic behavior, as if, “Of course, it is OK;” in addition, the woman may be talked out of her doubts if she does ask a question.

• There may be intangible gains for the bystander, (like getting attention and support from a perpetrator), or tangible gains for himself and for family and friends, and these gains may seem to cancel the problematic aspects of a perpetrator’s behavior.

Three: The bystander cannot or does not decide if action should be taken

• A new supervisor who sees something problematic may doubt his own competence to know what to do. He has no relevant experience, and does not know whom he could ask. He is very concerned about being accused of slander.

• A bystander from a different cultural, ethnic or religious background, who sees problematic behavior by a co-worker or community member away from the organization or community, has no idea about what can be done if it appears that she has no conclusive proof, and no (other) witness.

• A project leader thinks, “Any kind of action will threaten my work unit here, and also the whole project.”

• A bystander who is on a travel assignment, thinks, “There is no one who is competent—and there is no one powerful enough—and no one here that I trust—to inquire, investigate, analyze, and fix this.”

• Two friends who notice problematic behavior decide together that, “Any action would result in too much being done or nothing being done—even just talking about an investigation would have bad consequences.” (And, in fact nearly everyone hates investigations.)

Four: The bystander cannot or does not take personal action

• A bystander living or working in a different culture cannot imagine himself or herself reporting unacceptable behavior: “I have been taught from childhood not to attract attention.”
The bystander has heard about someone who tried to stop unacceptable behavior, allegedly with very bad consequences.16

A member of the community does not like the unacceptable behavior but understands “where the perpetrator is coming from”—and thinks that the people who will get hurt deserve it.

A manager or community leader says, “No one wants to hear bad news. No one is asking to hear about problems here. There is no feedback about what would happen if someone made a report. So far as I can tell, no one actually knows if there even is a real “complaint system”, or whether things are just handled by whoever has the wheel. Probably most problems just get ignored.”17

A worker or neighbor in a nearby unit cannot assess the evidence of behavior next door that she thinks may be wrong; she assumes any action will be “his word against mine,” and worries that her own competence or behavior may be questioned.

The bystander may think taking action is not part of her or his job description or role in the community; “There are other people here senior to me. Surely someone more expert than I will act.”

An overworked single parent is exhausted: “I am just going to go on keeping my head down, and focus on my work.”

Frightened production workers, or construction workers, wish for specific options that do not appear to be available: “My supervisor is the only person I could have told, but he is just about to leave.” “There is no supervisor in this work unit that I could go to who is from my background.” “I could only report if I could do it anonymously.” “I would need to talk it over with someone safe before I could take any action but I do not know to whom to go.” “I could only do this within an official channel that could guarantee no bad consequences, but no one can prevent covert payback.” “In my culture I could only do this through a back-door, informal route and I do not know of one.”

A young supervisor or community leader knows that loyalty is everything: “The person that I report to is the problem. But—important people get treated very differently.”

A public services worker or human resource officer is wary about giving offense in his very diverse work environment: “I cannot risk raising a concern about someone from another culture.”

A young trainee alone in the locker room who overhears something cannot imagine taking action by herself: “If only someone else would notice and say something. If only I had someone else to act with me.”

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17 Many studies make this point, e.g., Colvin, op.cit., p.14, and many ombuds practitioners hear this view.
• A technician, who wants to obtain citizenship, worries that people will guess who reported the behavior if he makes a report about it. He thinks immediately of bad consequences: being blamed, losing a visa, being shunned by co-workers, being scolded by family back home for sticking his neck out, or subject to a lawsuit. “There is no way to prevent covert retaliation. I would be seen forever as a troublemaker and not as a professional.”

• A supervisor or community leader or parent has been told by the perpetrator or another bystander or a family member not to discuss the matter with anyone; he is very intimidated, and is scared to have the situation come to light.

Why do some bystanders act or come forward?

Many bystanders who act responsibly speak of socially constructive reasons for coming forward. They cite relevant laws, rules and policies, the requirements of their position, a responsibility to their community, their profession or work unit, and good friends. Many talk about careful training by an older family member or a good mentor. A senior professional may mention her having had good role models over the years. A teenager may speak of a coach or grandparent who showed him the way to behave.

Some responsible bystanders speak of a responsibility toward their faith, their community, the values they were taught as children, family honor, or their country. Many want to protect someone.

It seems probable that some kinds of responsible bystander behavior are very common in the mundane world. Examples abound. Many lost items are returned to their owners. People get help crossing the street. Strangers help people who drop something. Misdirected packages get delivered correctly. Courageous souls sometimes help to direct traffic to undo a gridlock. Kind souls move from a good seat on an airplane to help a family; others shovel out someone else’s driveway. Injuries on the street get reported. It is likely that pro-social motives are quite common among many people.

However a significant amount of helpful bystander behavior occurs for reasons that may appear less appealing. Some bystanders are really angry with the perceived offender, and happy to make an anonymous phone call. Some want revenge or punishment—to stop or get back at a person they believe to have harassed them. Some will want to punish a person who reminds them of someone who injured them. Some may expect a tangible or intangible reward for coming forward. Some want to interfere with the progress of a competitor at work or in the community. Some simply feel desperate.

Some bystanders may take a very quiet, informal action to stop the behavior. They may hope to stop the unacceptable behavior, while keeping the authorities from finding out about it—hoping to protect themselves, and family members and/or the perpetrator.
Taking Action. In general, people are most likely to take responsible action if:

* They see or hear of behavior they believe to be dangerous, especially if it seems like an emergency, and especially if they think that they or significant others are in immediate danger;\(^{18}\)

* They perceive that an apparent perpetrator intends harm, and especially if that person is seen to have hurt or humiliated family members or people like themselves;

* They believe they have powerful or complete evidence, or others will accompany them as witnesses if they make a report—that is, they think they will be believed;\(^{19}\)

* There are resources that are seen to be: safe, credible and fair, accessible and easy to find;\(^{20}\)
  
  • They know and trust a specific person to go to for advice, especially a leader in a community or a manager in charge of the relevant work unit;\(^ {21}\)
  
  • There are trusted “access points” like health care practitioners, human resources personnel, security, quality assurance, compliance, or ethics officers, especially if these people are known personally;
  
  • There are “zero barrier” access points, like an organizational or community ombudsman, or religious counselors or a community “elder”—someone with whom they can consult completely off the record—and who will help, in a safe way, to develop a choice of options for action;
  
  • There is a Hotline or Dialog Line, or a cell-phone reporting “app,” that is believed to be safe, and which is known to result in effective action;

* They know “how things work” in the organization or community. Their situation has more than one option and there is an option (or person) that meets their particular needs. They have reason to believe—if they decide to report the behavior—that the organization or community will take appropriate and timely action.\(^ {22}\) Alternatively, they may come to believe that taking some kind of action is the only alternative open to them.

What Can Be Done to Improve the Bystander’s “Context”?

Public Discussion and Training are Essential. Especially in organizations and communities with very diverse populations and high turnover, it is essential to help people learn the rules, definitions of “what is unacceptable and why,” local

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\(^{19}\) The point is frequently reported by ombuds practitioners.


\(^{21}\) Amy Edmondson and colleagues at Harvard Business School have studied this phenomenon in some depth.

\(^{22}\) Colvin, op.cit.
It is important that people understand the meaning of a “good faith report,” and the definition of retaliation if there is any kind of protection from retaliation. In an organization it is important to know the relevant policies and procedures with respect to intimidation and retaliation. In a community it is important to know that powerful people may be able to protect a bystander.

It may help for some public education to be done issue by issue. Issue-focused training helps bystanders know and recognize specific problems and helps to teach how a person can take action. Training of bystanders can impart skills to deal with one kind of problem—which may then be used when the bystander meets a different problem. Two types of skills training are particularly useful:

- **Safety and harassment are issues of special importance:** Even if an agency or organization or community is hoping to foster responsible bystander action about “all” unacceptable behavior, it may be useful, if relevant to the workplace or community, to offer specific skills training with respect to abuse and assault, alcohol, bullying, drugs, harassment and safety. This is true for a number of reasons.

  Alcohol and drugs are “special issues” because many forms of unacceptable behavior are associated with the use of alcohol and drugs and, also, bystanders often know if there is misuse of alcohol and drugs.

  Bullying, and other forms of harassment, abuse and assault also are “special issues.” Of great importance, a perception of having been harassed, assaulted or bullied is frequently the tipping point for a bystander to take action about any form of unacceptable behavior. That is, a bystander who is thinking about taking action with respect to a particular offender—about an unrelated form of unacceptable behavior—may be more likely to take action if that offender is also thought to have harassed people in the past.

  More generally, there are additional reasons (in the context of seeking to prevent “all” unacceptable behavior) to build on bystander skills that relate to ensuring safety, and preventing abuse and harassment.

  Safety, responsible relationships, “supporting the local community” and “respect,” may be easier to discuss than misconduct and crime. (The idea of whistle blowing often is not kindly received—and nearly everyone hates investigations. Supporting the safety and success of a work unit or local community is much easier to discuss—and these discussions also may

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serve to establish a social norm that makes “all” unacceptable behavior less likely.)

Finally, discussions about safety and respect are quite common in many organizations and in many communities, and may form a familiar platform for the idea of “See something? Do something, and don’t do nothing?” People who are already accustomed to thinking about “safe procedures and respect for members of the work unit or community”—as an alternative to safety problems and harassment—may be more likely to notice other forms of unacceptable behavior. They also may learn about how to take action, how to report and who is to be trusted.

**Success stories help.** Communicating stories of bystanders—who have acted on the spot to stop problematic behavior or who have reported it—may help to support the social norms about safety and responsible conduct. It appears helpful to describe responsible bystanders as if they are “normal humans who are doing the right thing” through good observation and ordinary competence. That is, responsible bystander behavior is not exceptional heroism requiring super-human skills. Helpful bystanders should be portrayed as role models we all can follow.

**Appeals to several different, socially positive motives may help.** In the growing literature about bystanders there are many narrowly focused studies. Individual studies often look at just one or two motives to be responsible bystanders, in one context, with respect to one kind of issue.

In real life, the challenge is how to foster action from people who may be different from each other, who change their minds from time to time, who move from one context to another, who are caught up in multi-issue situations. It may therefore be helpful, in connecting with bystanders, to offer a number of different reasons for responsible behavior.

It is not just that bystanders are all different individuals, even in an apparently homogenous culture. Each bystander may have several social identities, only one of which would motivate action in a given case—e.g. the honor of our highly skilled technical group, the honor of our faith, the good name of our organization, the safety of neighbors like us, the safety of oneself or a family member, an appeal for protection of coming generations, or patriotism, or requirements of law. It maybe that just one important “identity”—for example identifying oneself as a survivor of personal abuse—may propel a bystander to seek to help another person, or punish abusers.

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24 Because bystanders often consider a wide range of options other than just reporting to authorities, “See something? Do something, don’t do nothing” may be sometimes be more useful than “See something—say something.” But training on this point may need to be combined with of options for the bystander together with some pros and cons for various options.
Complete proof should not be required. It helps for bystanders to know that they do not need to have perfect evidence to act, especially if they act appropriately and informally. A belief that “just a hunch might be important” can be built into teaching stories and training, with examples of how unobtrusive inquiry can be helpful in fixing many problems early on, by informal intervention. This is especially true in organizations and communities. It should be portrayed as normal, in relevant circumstances, to raise a question, person to person, without necessarily rocking the boat.

Safe, accessible and credible options need to be understood. Most people need to know there are safe and accessible ways: 1) to seek private advice and support, and 2) to report.

Many people want to talk things over before they decide to take action and before an employer or the authorities are formally involved. Most people prefer a trusted, local person in charge, or a respected in-group “elder.” An ombudsman or religious leader may help. Anonymous help lines or internet support groups may help. Apps for the cell phone are increasingly helpful about safety hazards, bullying and assault.

Options—and a choice of options—for talking things over, and for reporting, are very important to many bystanders. Some bystanders will only help if they can take informal action. They may consider many options. They may be willing to try personally: to prevent or deter, question, interrupt, re-direct, mitigate, or remediate unacceptable behavior. They may be willing to do this alone—or together with family members or peers. They may try one option—and then another.

Some will prefer—or later be willing—to take formal action. They may be willing to report unacceptable behavior to authorities, as a first step—or as a last resort. They may only be willing to report if they can do so anonymously—or if they can act together with like-minded others.

Having a choice of options—and “multiple access points”—are major issues for bystanders who want “someone like themselves” to go to. It may be a challenge for employers and community leaders to provide enough, alternative options. Mandatory reporting and mandatory investigation requirements are now commonplace, with respect to some issues, in some circumstances. It is now a leading issue, for those who design complaint systems, to meet the challenge of designing a complaint system so that the benefits of “bystander choice” can survive.

25 Koocher et al, op.cit., make this point in detail, urging bystanders to be willing to act on the spot informally, in many or most situations. The “User-Friendly Guide” that accompanied their article in Science could be offered to everyone in labs. 26 The current debates about requirements in various organizations to report sexual assault, sexual harassment, or all illegal behavior, illuminate this issue.
“Receptivity” helps. Many people believe their organization or community leaders do not really want to hear any bad news. Many people automatically distrust the capabilities of leaders to look into, investigate and deal with an issue without bad consequences. The credibility—of those who receive complaints—is key to encouraging bystander reports. This is why local people in charge who are trusted are so important as a first point of access. Everyone needs to trust the person they have gone to for advice, if that person says, “This matter needs to go forward to investigation.”

Research and practice suggest that it may help to provide people of different demographics, as access points for bystanders.

Competent, impartial investigators help. For a system to be seen as safe and credible, investigations need to be to be competent, fair, prompt, thorough and discreet. It is important for people to believe that false allegations will be dealt with appropriately, as well as good faith concerns. Community members, family members, workers, managers, and senior leaders often do not trust what will happen if they report information.

Providing information about procedures may help. People in an organization or community may know little about relevant procedures. Organizational and community leaders need to communicate frequently and consistently about the “complaint system,” if people are to know what they need to know. This requires planning and resources. The challenges here are not simple.

It is objectively difficult for complaint handlers to deal fairly and effectively with reports of unacceptable behavior. One reason is that they rarely receive really good evidence about wrongdoing, let alone “all” the relevant evidence. They may hear second-hand stories and fragments of stories. It may help to teach some community and organizational members how to make a report by answering the questions: Who, What, When, Where, Why, How, with Whom.

Complaint handlers often lack appropriate training about dealing with ancillary problems, like retaliation, complexity and maintaining privacy. For example, they may not know how to prevent or deal with concerns of overt—let alone covert—retaliation or “pay-back.”

Line and staff managers and community leaders may lack the resources they need to deal with complex concerns about unacceptable behavior. (A complex concern might have multiple issues, multiple cohorts, and the concern may cross multiple organizational, community and national boundaries. Investigatory and decision-making processes may appear to move slowly and awkwardly in complex cases.) And finally, complaint handlers (for many reasons) keep personnel actions very private. This means managers and community leaders may not have “learned how” by hearing about other cases.
Take all these points together and it is easy to see why many bystanders do not understand what will happen if they come forward. Building the credibility of response mechanisms requires giving the people within an organization or community some information about what happens when people report. It may be possible to create and provide generic communications about how the response mechanisms work, how the rights of everyone are taken into account, how long the procedures may take, and what the (aggregate) results are in terms that matter to constituents.

**Bystanders need care and respect.** It is important to respond with care to the interests of individuals who come forward to report. It is commonplace to note that a community, complaint system, or law enforcement, should deal fairly with complainants and respondents.

It is *not* common to have thought through the special situation of people who are not directly injured parties or perpetrators, but just bystanders. Organizations and communities need to build the reputation of dealing respectfully, as well as fairly and competently, with bystanders who offer information.

This may be especially important with problematic bystanders. Some people who report unacceptable behavior are bewildered or anxious. Some are also (potential) perpetrators. A bystander—who is doing the right thing by reporting—may be very angry, or desperate, or actually seeking revenge—and in fact may only have taken the risk of reporting because of that anger. Women and men who have felt harassed or mistreated in the past may be fearful and very upset. They also may believe they are taking additional risks in coming forward, and may need reassurance about their safety. Some may need protection.

**A Focus on the Future**

We need to know more in this relatively new field. Some organizations and some communities are innovating well with some of the issues in this paper. Some are collecting cases, looking for data about what works and what does not work—data that will be very helpful. We especially need to know more about bystanders who have succeeded with informal and formal options in any milieu.

Some organizations are experimenting with programs to link bystander training to professional and other skills training. A program on research integrity can include “what to do if you see problematic behavior.” A program on responsible sexual behavior or use of alcohol can do the same. A program on mentoring might discuss what to do if one sees or hears about bullying. A program on diversity and inclusion might include what to do about micro-inequities and how to encourage micro-affirmations. Programs on safety might include what to do when

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27 Christopher Colvin, op.cit.
one is concerned about someone else’s unsafe behavior. Professionals of all kinds might be taught how to think about options, if one is concerned about the mental illness or unprofessional behavior of a colleague or client.

We also need to know about the risks of encouraging more bystanders to act. We need to gather experience about false allegations, vengeful allegations; reports based on misinformation, and mischief makers who want to annoy the complaint handlers.

We need stories about employees and managers, passersby and community members who just “gave up” on trying to change behavior they see to be unacceptable. It would be helpful to know from case studies whether they may have been correct or mistaken in their judgments and what the circumstances were. We need to learn more about perceptions of retaliation and “payback.”

Ideally peers and bystanders should have a choice of options for addressing unacceptable behavior in good faith, without fearing retaliation, disrespect or disbelief. This is true on the street, in communities, and in organizations. Training programs, public education and a systems approach are needed. Bystanders need to learn how to observe, how to listen to concerns of others, and how they may act or report; we need to learn how to help bystanders to do this. We should study the effects of new initiatives about bystanders.

Appendix One

Some Responsible Bystander Actions

When people think about bystander behavior they sometimes think of just two options. They imagine bystanders as basically doing nothing—or reporting to authorities. In real life, responsible bystanders do many things. Here are some ways, derived from many reports, that bystanders have taken responsible action with respect to unacceptable behavior. They:

- Ask questions, of the apparent perpetrator, in a direct or indirect fashion
- Consult with personal or professional resources, in a direct or indirect fashion, with or without information identifying the perpetrator
- Discourage and disparage behavior that is unacceptable
- Deflect or derail the behavior (unobtrusively as with humor, or overtly)
- Engage others to help deal with the behavior
- Instigate or trigger a “generic approach” such as asking for a relevant community or organizational program on the subject, without identifying any individual
- Interrupt the behavior
• Mitigate the effects of the unacceptable behavior, by personal action
• “Name” or talk about the behavior in the community, so it does not happen unnoticed
• Observe the behavior, gathering more information before choosing an option, perhaps collecting evidence
• Prevent the behavior from recurring (e.g. by making the behavior punishable, or by encouraging positive alternatives for the potential perpetrator, in a “pivot” approach)
• Punish the behavior themselves (at the time or later) or act to see it punished
• Re-channel plans or persons or resources engaged in unacceptable behavior, for example engaging the relevant person elsewhere, removing their access
• Remediate the behavior, (noticeably or behind the scenes, in an overt way or completely “casually”)
• Report the behavior in one of many different ways, (alone or with others, once or repeatedly, in writing or orally, identifiably or anonymously, formally or informally, immediately or later, directly or indirectly, with a few salient details or with exhaustive information)
• Repudiate the specific unacceptable behavior in an explicit public fashion
• Stop the behavior
• Stop the behavior and follow up, directly or indirectly, to see that it stays stopped
• Take covert action in such a way that the behavior of the perpetrator will come to the attention of some inside or outside authority
• Teach others how to identify the unacceptable behavior and to analyze “Who, What, When, Where, Why, How, and with Whom?” in thinking about options
• Teach others how to lead and exemplify positive alternatives, (in groups, as relevant, or “Each one, Teach one; Each one, Reach one”)
• Try more than one of these interventions as needed

In tailoring strategies in a specific case, local experts might ask, “What might help particular bystanders of interest to act responsibly in this situation, given recent events and local perceptions?”