Helping bystanders take responsibility for diversity

by Maureen Scully, Mary Rowe, and Laura Moorehead

A team calls for a break after a productive morning of work. Someone tells an offensive joke. Everyone is silent. A few people laugh quietly but nervously. One or two people may feel the sting of the joke. The team's momentum is broken.

In this scenario, the "bystanders"—those who witness offensive talk or inappropriate actions—could play a crucial role in signaling that the group values diversity and that offensive jokes are not appreciated. Bystanders can uphold norms about the importance of valuing diversity. If a norm is deeply held, its violation should provoke reactions.

Diversity training often speaks to different parties: 1) "victims" who have felt injured by insensitive remarks or discriminatory practices, 2) "perpetrators" who could learn not to injure, and 3) managers who want to set an inclusive tone. People who may resist identifying with the first three roles may readily relate as a bystander, recalling awkward times when they wished they knew what to do.

Bystander inaction can be reduced if people:

- practice some interventions in a safe space so they feel more ready
- think through various scenarios in advance
- expand their menu of possible responses
- understand cultural differences in appropriate interventions
- learn from others' experiments and discover new ways to act
- take personal ownership for the situation, instead of just sitting back

Some Tactics for Bystanders

Inclusion
- Invite someone into the conversation
- Solicit the opinions of people who have been quiet
- Be an ally for someone taking a risk
- Be gracious, help others save face

Body language/signaling
- Stand up
- Turn away
- Raise your hand
- Bang the table
- Say "ouch"
- Laugh
- Leave the room

Discovery
- Ask questions
- Give people a chance to clarify
- Check assumptions
- Consider the broader context

Cooling things down
- Ask for a break
- Use humor (but with care)
- Suggest next steps, another meeting, off-line conversations

Heating things up
- Surface emotions
- Say how the situation makes you feel
- Point to the "unspeakable" issues that may be lurking

- become self aware and understand the norms they want to uphold
- discuss options with one another and make bystander action more open, expected, and legitimate.

A training program for bystanders

At the MIT Sloan School of Management, members of the Sloan Diversity and Community Committee organized a training program for bystanders in the spring of 1997. The planning and training involved people in all areas and levels, including faculty, administration, staff, and students, a collaboration which was itself significant and appreciated by participants.

The group helped create training materials for a one-day workshop, which was opened by powerful remarks from the dean and representatives from industry. Laura Moorehead coordinated a group of twenty outside facilitators to lead small break-out groups for the 310 participants.

When the program was adapted for a larger group in the fall of 1997, a group of forty students and administrators came forward and asked to be trained as facilitators.

To bring to life some situations and options for bystanders, the trainers created a series of videotaped scenarios, using real people from all areas of the School in situations based on real incidents. The videos were the basis for discussion in the small break-out groups during the one-day workshop.

A sample scenario, "Introducing the Invisible Colleague," went like this. Three students—two men and a woman—are waiting for their chance to talk with a corporate recruiter at a social function. Their conversation reveals that the woman knows quite a lot about the industry. The recruiter comes over and introduces himself to the two men, ignoring the outstretched hand of the woman and her attempted interjections. The men talk animatedly with the recruiter, even tossing in some of the points the woman had made earlier. In one version the situation worsens, the bystanders are oblivious, and the woman grows more frustrated. In the second take, one of the men introduces her to the recruiter, but hesitantly. In the third take, he introduces her firmly and with clear reference to her credentials, but continues to hold the floor as he speaks. In the fourth take, he introduces her graciously and immediately lets her take over to speak for herself, having shifted the recruiter's focus of attention.

Lessons for participants

In the training sessions, many viewers could relate to having been in the "invisible" spot, when their characteristics put them in the less dominant group. Some said

afterwards that they knew they had done things like the recruiter, perhaps assuming that the woman was inconsequential—"just a wife" as one person confessed. (This training approach has the side benefit of delivering lessons in an indirect and non-threatening way about the effect of such behavior, without provoking defensiveness or backlash.)

Some people imagine that an active bystander role involves thinking up a witty retort in the moment. Instead, the training emphasizes a variety of ways to respond, some as simple as standing up and calling for a break. (*See the box for a list of tactics for bystanders.*) A good bystander is practiced in reading cultural signals to recognize a brewing crisis in the first place.

There are times when it is better for a bystander to wait until tempers have cooled and give feedback off-line. The training invited people to weigh the pros and cons of colluding—remaining silent and giving the appearance of going along. In workplace settings, people may have to pick their battles and not be an active bystander every time, in order to meter out their political capital.

In the weeks following the training, a number of people mentioned that they had tried bystander interventions. Sometimes these were done with a self-conscious reference—"OK, now I'm going to be the good bystander," which broke the ice and allowed a shared language to emerge.

Bystander training in context

It is important to remember that, while the bystander's role during or just after an incident is important and can help shape cultural norms, it is an *ad hoc* response to issues that often require structural solutions. A successful bystander will interrupt unprofessional behavior, but there must be systems in place, such as formal policies, a diversity strategy, or an ombudsperson office, which back up the norms and provide any subsequent support or action to prevent future incidents.

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Diversity@Work
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July 27-29, 1998
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TWI Inc. announces the launch of its new on-line service, The Virtual Diversity Community.



Trevor Wilson
President, TWI Inc.

The Virtual Diversity Community is state-of-the-art and is designed for, but not exclusive to, the needs of managers as they face the many challenges of coping with a multi-faceted workforce. Through its many services, participants will be able to simultaneously access information and support as they address various diversity issues.

Two of the services to be highlighted at the launch are **The Diversity Forum** and **The Virtual Clipping Service.** The dialogue groups offered in **The Diversity Forum** will become a meeting ground for people interested in diversity to share ideas, information, and data.

Join us for the official U.S. launch of **The Virtual Diversity Community** on July 27th, between 5:30-6:30 pm at the IQPC Conference, "Performance Measurements for Diversity," at the Westin River North, Chicago, IL. For conference information call IQPC at (800) 882-8684.

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