

## Speak Up: Responding to Everyday Bigotry

### What Can I Do At Work?

By the Southern Poverty Law Center:

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“One day (the supervisor) took me aside to deliver what he must have thought was a compliment. He told me, ‘You’re a good worker. You’re not like the other Mexicans.’ I just nodded and went back to work because I wanted to keep my job.”

The workplace is, for some, the only place they experience diversity. For those who live in segregated neighborhoods, attend segregated houses of worship or take part in segregated hobbies or activities, work becomes the only place they interact with people of varied and diverse backgrounds. It often is, for these people, a testing ground.

The workplace often offers built-in grievance procedures, tied to policies or laws, which can be used to respond to some forms of everyday bigotry. You need not file a lawsuit to have such a

policy be effective; many roundtable participants spoke of invoking such policies when speaking up, saying the mere mention carries weight.

Power, too, comes into play at the workplace. The dynamic of an employee speaking to a supervisor is very different than a supervisor speaking to an employee. Likewise, an executive's tacit acceptance of bigoted remarks can create an atmosphere where bias thrives — just as one powerfully placed comment from that executive can curb everyday bigotry in significant ways. Who sets the tone at your office? And what leverage do you have with that person? If you lack leverage, who has it? And might that person be an ally?

### **What Can I Do About Casual Comments? 'Have You Had Diction Lessons?'**



An African American businesswoman in the South writes: "I was speaking with a white co-worker when, midway through the conversation, she smiled and said, 'You speak so clearly. Have you had diction lessons?' — like for an African American to speak clearly, we'd have to have diction lessons."

A manager writes: "One of my employees constantly makes 'jokes' about people being 'bipolar' or 'going postal' or being 'off their meds.' I happen to know that one of our other employees — within earshot of these comments — is on medication for depression. How can I stop the bad behavior without revealing proprietary information?"

One co-worker asks another if she wants to go out for lunch. "We're going to get Ping-Pong chicken," she says, faking a vaguely Asian accent.

An Italian American woman's co-worker makes daily comments about her heritage. "Are you in the mafia?" "Are you related to the Godfather?" There are only six colleagues in the office, and the Italian American woman doesn't know how — or if — to respond.

**Interrupt early.** Workplace culture largely is determined by what is or isn't allowed to occur. If people are lax in responding to bigotry, then bigotry prevails. Speak up early and often in order to build a more inclusive environment.

**Use — or establish — policies.** Call upon existing — too often forgotten or ignored — policies to address bigoted language or behavior. Work with your personnel director or human resources department to create new policies and procedures, as needed. Also ask your company to provide anti-bias training.

**Go up the ladder.** If behavior persists, take your complaints up the management ladder. Find allies in upper management, and call on them to help create and maintain an office environment free of bias and bigotry.

**Band together.** Like-minded colleagues also may form an alliance and then ask the colleague or supervisor to change his or her tone or behavior.

### **What Can I Do About Workplace Humor?**

'Please Don't Tell It'

A man mentions to a colleague that he is originally from West Virginia. The colleague laughs and says she knows some "jokes" about people from West Virginia.

She begins to tell one, and it's clear that the "joke" will have an offensive punch line.

The man holds up his hand and says, "Don't tell it. Please don't tell it."

She laughs, perhaps thinking he's joking himself, and tells not one but three "jokes," each with an increasingly bigoted punch line.

The man, at a loss for words, simply sits down when she is done.



**Don't laugh.** Meet a bigoted "joke" with silence, and maybe a raised eyebrow. Use body language to communicate your distaste for bigoted "humor."

**Interrupt the laughter.** "Why does everyone think that's funny?" Tell your co-workers why the "joke" offends you, that it feels demeaning and prejudicial. And don't hesitate to interrupt a "joke" with as many additional "no" messages as needed.

**Set a 'not in my workspace' rule.** Prohibit bigotry in your cubicle, your office or whatever other boundaries define your workspace. Be firm, and get others to join in. Allies can be invaluable in helping to curb bigoted remarks and behavior at the workplace.

**Provide alternate humor.** Learn and share jokes that don't rely on bias, bigotry or stereotypes as the root of their humor.

### **What Can I Do About Sexist Remarks?**

'Business As Usual'

A female manager routinely is referred to as the "office mom." No male manager is ever referred to as the office "dad," and male managers expect the female manager to handle office birthdays and other non-job-related tasks. "That kind of sexism happens all the time," she says.

A female employee reports, "One of my male coworkers always comments on the physical appearance of our female colleagues. 'She's such a pretty girl,' or 'She's a lovely woman.' I find these comments inappropriate and have commented to him about them, but his behavior doesn't change."

A male employee bakes cookies and brings them to the office. A female employee, arriving later, asks who brought them. She thanks the man, then asks, "Did your wife bake them?" Another man wrote of a co-worker telling him his knowledge of gardening makes him seem "like a woman."

**Be direct.** Respond to the speaker in a way that makes sexist assumptions clear. "I'm not the office mom; I'm the office manager." Or, "No, I'm the baker in our household, not my wife."

**Identify the pattern.** Tell your supervisor, "In our weekly manager meetings, I've noticed that people expect me to take notes. I'm wondering if we could rotate that responsibility, so it's evenly distributed between male and female managers."

**Start a brown-bag discussion group.** If sexism is a persistent problem in your workplace, start an informal dialogue group to discuss the issue during your lunch breaks. Provide support for one another, and create an action plan.

**Use incidents to teach tolerance.** Advocate for staff training about sexism in the office; provide trainers with real-life examples from your office.

## **What Can I Do About Meeting Missteps? 'Stereotyping is Stereotyping'**



Two co-workers, one of whom is deaf, are asked to meet with an executive from another firm. They go to the other man's office, and a sign-language interpreter accompanies them. The executive chooses to face the interpreter, speaking to him, not looking at or acknowledging the employee who is deaf.

An African American woman, in a staff meeting about budget issues, hears a white co-worker suggest cost-cutting measures for landscaping: "Why don't we just get the Mexicans to do it?"

A woman writes, "A good-hearted liberal co-worker makes comments at staff meetings like, 'All Republicans are stupid,' or 'All Republicans are this,' or 'All Republicans are that.' I'm a Democrat who agrees with her politics, but I think those comments are as offensive as someone saying 'All immigrants are lazy' or 'All Irish people are drunks.' Stereotyping is stereotyping. Short of saying, 'Some of my best friends are Republicans,' what can I do?"

**Seize the moment.** With the interpreter, the colleague said, "I hate to interrupt, but just as a matter of practice, you should look at the person you're talking to, not the interpreter." In the meeting, an observer might say, "What do you mean by that? What are you saying about Mexicans?"

**Address the issue privately.** Take the coworker aside and gently explain what you find offensive: "You know, you're giving Democrats a bad name when you make sweeping generalizations about Republicans."

**Check in with the meeting leader.** If you are uncomfortable dealing with the speaker directly, consider speaking with the person who called the meeting. Set expectations or ground rules prior to the next meeting.

### **What Can I Do About Boss Bias?**



#### **'You're Not Like The Other Mexicans'**

From an Arizona man: "I'm a Mexican American, and I worked for a time, a long time ago, in construction. One day (the supervisor) took me aside to deliver what he must have thought was a compliment. He told me, 'You're a good worker. You're not like the other Mexicans.' I just nodded and went back to work because I wanted to keep my job. But I wish I would have said something to him, set him straight that stuff like that isn't a compliment."

A woman works at a company where a male co-worker comes in one day with a newly pierced ear. Their manager sees the earring and laughingly calls him a "faggot."

When bias comes from the boss, it's easy to assume nothing can be done. The boss has all the power, right? Regardless of a company's size, nothing gets done without the workers; your power rests in this simple fact. Try these response techniques;

**Focus on the company's people.** "A lot of different kinds of people work for you, and for this company. We come to work every day and give you our best. What you just said, does it really honor me and the other people here?"

**Tie tolerance to the bottom line.** Remind your supervisor that when people feel valued and respected, a healthy and productive work environment emerges. "Is 'faggot' really a word we should be throwing around? We don't know who's gay and who's straight, who has gay relatives and who doesn't. I think that comment could really upset some people — and distract them from their work."

**Go up the ladder.** Consider your options, based on your supervisor's temperament and the office environment. If you're uncomfortable confronting the boss directly, consult your company's human resources department to find out what harassment policies are in place and whether they apply.

### **What Can I Do About My Own Bias?**

'I Said Nothing'

A Southern white woman is an event coordinator working with an African American minister. They end up talking about a mutual acquaintance who is known to be persistent and driven.

"Without thinking," the woman writes, "I uttered a phrase I grew up hearing — 'Yeah, he's a real slave driver.' As soon as it was out of my mouth, I realized for the first time the source and meaning of the word. I was ashamed and bewildered and wanted to apologize."

But before she can say anything, the minister, looking her in the eye, quickly replies, "Yes, he's a real taskmaster."

She agrees and later thanks him for "his kindness and subtle but important education."

The result: "I haven't used the term 'slave driver' since."

When a colleague tells you that you've said or done something that offends or hurts them, try not to be defensive, even if the statement's impact was unintentional. Consider these approaches:

**Be open to feedback.** Ask clarifying questions, if need be. "Please help me understand. How have I offended you?" Be gracious, and consider the moment a learning opportunity. Thank the person for pointing it out, and ask for continued feedback.

**Focus on the work relationship.** Strive to reconnect and ensure that the moment doesn't sidetrack your ongoing ability to work together. "I know this has been awkward for both of us. Is there anything I should do, or that we should do, as a next step? I really want us to keep working well together."

**Change your behavior.** Don't wait for someone to be offended by what you say. Listen closely to the phrases and terms you use; are some of them "acceptable" only because the targeted group is not present? Bigotry is bigotry no matter who hears it; strive to model respect and tolerance wherever you are.