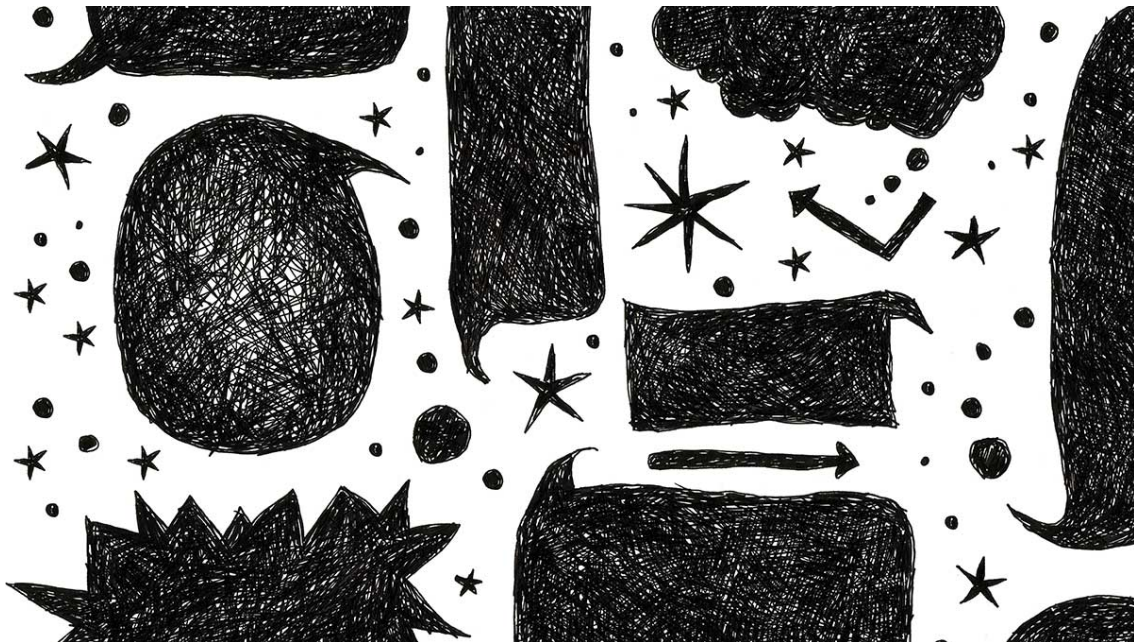


How to React to Biased Comments at Work

by Judith Honesty, David Maxfield, and Joseph Grenny

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Summary. Bias at work is sometimes overt and insidious, but the subtle, “Wait, what just happened?” moments are far more frequent. And when you aren’t sure if someone is being prejudiced or not, it’s hard to know how to deal with the situation. Leaders implement... [more](#)

Bias at work can be overt and insidious. It can be shocking and enraging. But the subtle “Wait, what just happened?” moments are far more frequent. Take these examples: A client assumes you are in a subordinate role because of your age. A prospective customer only makes eye contact with your white colleague. A

coworker calls you “angry” while your equally assertive male counterpart gets labeled “strong” (a far too often occurrence for women as one of our previous studies showed).

Moments like these leave you questioning others’ intentions and your own perceptions. The inner dialogue can sound a bit like, “I’m upset. But should I be? Do I have a right to be?” At best, this shadowy bias is exhausting. At worst, it is soul destroying.

Bias’s sometimes slippery nature also makes it difficult to eradicate in the workplace. Leaders implement policies that prohibit discrimination against protected classes, but rules can’t prevent unconscious, unintentional bias. How do you legislate status assumptions, eye contact, and silent perceptions?

Clearly, organizational cultures need to change. But in the meantime, what’s an individual to do who suffers daily from subtle inequities? While it’s unfair to place additional burdens on victims of bias, injustice is amplified if they aren’t provided coping tools for the interim.

We think of this as addressing both the seed and the soil. The seed is the individual who needs to know how to respond to bias and survive and thrive, regardless of the soil that surrounds it.

The soil is the organization that isn’t as unbiased as it wants to be. The soil’s goal is to become a place where diverse seeds can contribute and succeed.

Understanding Bias

Earlier this year, we asked people who felt they had experienced bias at work to describe the incident in detail. Within two weeks, we had 498 rich, passionate, and heartbreaking stories. Most described blatant actions of bias. For example:

“I was dining with my co-workers when two gay men walked by. Several coworkers jeered and displayed disgust. As I am gay, it was very disheartening that these employees who are trained in diversity and acceptance acted both unprofessionally and impolite. A coworker, who knows I am gay, told them they should know their audience but it went right over their heads and they returned to the conversation unashamed and unaware.”

Others illustrated momentary lapses, where the offender tried to recover, though it was usually too late. For example:

“I’m the only woman in a team of ten men. When I was pregnant, I told my manager at 11 weeks. He was exasperated. ‘That’s the last time I ever hire a woman,’ he said. I was gobsmacked. On Monday he apologized for his comment. ‘I was only joking,’ he said. I accepted his apology, but knew he wasn’t really joking. I wish I had stood up for myself.”

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Paradoxically, the rarest examples are the ones that happen most often: patterns of unintentional, unconscious bias. Their scarcity in our collection is probably because they involve subtle patterns that are tough to recognize, describe, and address.

“I am the only woman on a team of software engineers. The lead engineers, who have a lot of influence over who gets picked for the ‘cool’, new, and groundbreaking projects, typically overlook me. I feel it’s because I’d be a buzz kill in the male-locker-room atmosphere.”

The problem isn't just that people experience bias. It's that their experiences are often undiscussable. Victims don't want to call others bigots or be accused of "playing the diversity card" — these options can be career limiting. Instead, they keep their concerns to themselves.

We asked respondents to rate how permanent, pervasive, and controllable these incidents of bias are at work. These are the three dimensions Martin Seligman uses to assess helplessness and hopelessness — and even depression. The results were disheartening, but hardly surprising:

- **Permanent:** 49% of victims said the bias is an enduring part of their workplace and happens regularly and routinely.
- **Pervasive:** 66% said it impacts all aspects of their engagement, morale, motivation, commitment, and desire to advance in the organization.
- **Uncontrollable:** 60% said they did not feel they could master incidents of bias in the moment or prevent them from recurring in the future.

More than a quarter of the respondents (27%) described their experience with bias as the worst combination of all three: permanent, pervasive, and uncontrollable.

Improving the Seed: Skills for Individuals

Victims of bias need skills to replace ulcers, invective, and silent judgment with open, honest, and respectful dialogue. Individuals should know how to influence their workplace without alienating those they need support from. Below are skills we've seen people use successfully to address the subtleties of unconscious bias:

- **Use "C.P.R.":** You can choose to address issues at three levels: Content (a one-time incident), Pattern (a series of incidents), or Relationship (the impact of a pattern on your ability to work

productively with others). When an issue is overt and egregious — someone makes an intolerant comment — a content conversation works fine. However, with subtleties, you must gather more data until you can describe a pattern. For example, if the boss repeatedly reaches out to your direct reports and not to you, be sure you can cite a few instances and draw attention to the pattern or else your manager is likely to respond with sincere explanations of the single instance you're describing. Finally, consider addressing the relationship issues by helping others understand the cumulative effect of their behaviors on trust, cooperation, self-esteem, etc.

- **Know your goal:** When we experience injustice, we often feel provoked and disrespected — even angry. Before you speak up, think first about what you really want to have happen. Do you want an apology, punishment, or repentance? Is it enough for the bad behavior to stop? What kind of relationship would you like? The clearer your goals, the more likely you'll achieve them.
- **State your take:** Skilled individuals are careful to describe their concerns absent the judgments and accusations the rest of us hold when we speak up. For example, replace, "What you said about my pregnancy was sexist and abusive" with "Last Friday, you said, 'That's the last time I ever hire a woman.'" Describe what *really* just happened — no apologies, no self-repression, no accusations, and no indictments. Begin with the detailed facts, tentatively suggest what the facts mean to you, then invite others to a dialogue where you both can learn.
- **Make it safe:** Is a person who exhibits unconscious bias automatically a bigot? If so, then we're all bigots. Skilled individuals recognize that what we're up against is a human condition not simply personal flaws. It's challenging to describe biased behavior without others feeling attacked. Achieving a better outcome for the future requires that we help others and ourselves feel safe while addressing uncomfortable issues. For

example, you might begin with, “I don’t think you realize how that came across...”

Improving the Soil: Strategies for Organizations

Most organizations already have disciplinary procedures for egregious intentional bias, but many are missing strategies that can eliminate unintended, unconscious bias and those “What just happened here?” moments before they occur. The following approaches can influence cultural norms and practices to dramatically reduce unconscious bias.

- **Set challenging goals and track results:** Leaders must set challenging goals for results and the behaviors that enable them — and then hold themselves accountable for achieving them. Results include objective measures such as numbers of women, people of color, and LGBTQ individuals in each stage of the pipeline (new hires, supervisors, managers, executives, etc.), performance ratings, internal promotions, compensation, and attrition. Behaviors include leading-indicator measures such as perceived support, perceived barriers, and desire to advance.
- **Identify crucial moments:** Locate the times, places, and circumstances when bias are most likely to occur. For example, identify the crucial moments in a:
 - *Career path:* Job search, interviews, reviews, job opportunities, assignments, development, and promotions.
 - *Life path:* Marriage, pregnancy/adoption, childcare, elder care, sickness, and relocation.
 - *Daily work environment:* Poor performance on an assignment, good performance on an assignment, friction with managers, harassment, and an obnoxious coworker.
- **Combine diverse solutions:** Most Diversity and Inclusion initiatives employ a single solution. Some rely on training, others on policies, still others on support from the top. Our

research shows that combining four or more different solutions makes initiatives *ten times more likely to succeed*.

Bias, especially unintentional, unconscious bias, is a stubborn problem, deeply rooted in our culture. Eradicating it is exceptionally tough but by nurturing both the seed and the soil, organizations can help individuals cope while simultaneously taking the necessary steps to systematically prevent bias.

Judith Honesty is an experienced organizational development consultant specializing in facilitating executive team interactions. During her 25 years in organizational development, she has developed and implemented culture and leadership assessments and designed and delivered interpersonal skills training in the Americas, Europe, and Asia.

David Maxfield is a *New York Times* bestselling author, keynote speaker, and leading social scientist for business performance. He leads the research function at VitalSmarts, a corporate training and leadership development company. His work has been translated into 28 languages, is available in 36 countries, and has generated results for 300 of the Fortune 500.

Joseph Grenny is the author of the *New York Times* bestselling book, *Crucial Conversations*.

He is also the cofounder of Crucial Learning, a learning company that offers courses in the areas of communication, performance, and leadership.

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