

CONFLICT

# How to Respond to an Offensive Comment at Work

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Your colleague says something that immediately makes you feel uncomfortable. He thinks he's just being funny, but the comment is inappropriate – maybe even offensive, sexist, or racist. What should you say or do if you find yourself in this situation? Is there a way to draw attention to the comment without putting the other person on the defensive? And are you risking your reputation, job, or career by speaking up?

## **What the Experts Say**

There's no denying that this is a tough situation. Joan Williams, founding director of the Center for WorkLife Law at UC Hastings College of the Law, says that these decisions are particularly risky because they involve “two of the most corrosive elements of bias in the workplace”: the uncertainty that whether what you heard is bias and the fear that you might be penalized for how you handle it. It's normal to question ourselves in these situations, wondering whether we heard the person right or if it was just a joke.

Even if you think you would say something in the situation, you may find the reality is different. Research by Alexander Czopp, the director of the Center for Cross-Cultural Research at Western Washington University, and his colleagues show that there is a “discrepancy between what people predict they would do and what they actually do.” Here's some advice for the next time a colleague says something offensive.

### **Weigh the benefits of speaking up...**

The first step is to decide whether it's worth addressing the comment. There are certainly good reasons to do so. “Preserving your own sense of integrity” and “ridding the workplace of racism” are laudable goals, Williams notes. “If you don't speak up, you're signaling that this is OK. You've essentially just given the person permission to do it again.” This might also be an opportunity to change your colleague's behavior for the better – a chance you don't want to miss. Czopp's research shows that “addressing offensive behavior in the right way in the moment can change it in the future.”

If you're in a position of power, the stakes are higher. Managers have a responsibility (in some cases a legal one) to make sure no one feels threatened or uncomfortable at work, and studies show that you have more influence if you are not the subject of the bias, says Williams. “When it comes to sexism, for example, men tend to be more persuasive when confronting people. We afford them more credibility because it's not their ‘game.’”

### **...against the costs**

Williams adds that you need to consider whom you're dealing with, what their reaction might be, and what the political costs will be if you call them out. They might be dismissive (“You're

overreacting. It was just a joke.”) or get defensive (“What are you accusing me of?”). So ask yourself: How does this person normally react to being challenged? Are they generally self-aware? Well-intended?

You’ll also want to consider the person’s authority over you and whether they’re likely to penalize you for speaking up. “Your job security or personal safety may be at risk,” says Czopp. This is especially true if you’re part of a group already subject to bias. Williams’s research shows that women and people of color get more pushback when they’re assertive. That’s not to say you shouldn’t speak up, but you should be realistic about the consequences of doing so. If your ultimate aim is to keep your job, you may decide to keep quiet.

### **Don’t make assumptions**

If you decide to say something, approach the situation as if the person didn’t mean to offend you. Most of the time, “the person is just clueless and doesn’t know how their behavior is being interpreted,” Williams explains. Be compassionate; chances are, you’ve made mistakes too. “Have we all made stupid comments? Sure. You’re not perfect either,” says Williams. You might even share your own experience of saying something you later wished you could take back. Explaining that you’ve been in similar situations may make the person less defensive and more open to hearing your perspective.

### **Don’t accuse**

Be careful not to level accusations. Czopp’s research shows that harsh statements, such as “That’s racist,” resulted in much more defensive reactions. He says that most people have an “exaggerated view” of what these terms mean, so they react strongly: “We think of white supremacists, the KKK, and cross burning – anything that implies that we’re on the same continuum as those things is upsetting.” Williams agrees: “It might feel righteous to call people out, but no one wants to hear that they’re being sexist, racist, or otherwise offensive.”

### **Explain your reaction to the comment**

Instead of labeling the comment as offensive, Williams and Czopp both advise explaining how it makes you feel. You might say “I know it wasn’t your intent, but that made me uncomfortable” or “I’m confused by what you said.” Don’t think of this as sidestepping the issue, Czopp says. “It’s a much more effective approach that is “more likely to change their behavior in future situations.”

### **Ask a question**

Williams suggests following your initial statement with a question like “What did you mean by that comment?” or “What information are you basing that on?” By engaging the person in a discussion, you can help them explore their biases and clear up any possible misunderstandings. You might even ask them to repeat what they said. This will prompt them to think through what they meant by the remark, as well as its effect on others, and give them a chance to take it back.

### **Share information**

If the person doesn't think their comment was offensive, you can help educate them by offering an observation or more information. For example, if the person suggested that your female colleague is slacking off by leaving work early, you might say something like: “I read an interesting study the other day that found that when working moms leave the office, we assume they're taking care of their kids. But when working dads leave the office, we don't even notice.” It's important to do this in a way that isn't passive-aggressive. The more genuine you are about sharing information and not trapping the person in their bias, the more likely they are to hear you.

### **Try alternative approaches**

If you decide that you're not comfortable addressing the comment, there are other things you can do, says Czopp. For example, you might change the subject, sending “a subtle message” to the person that you disapprove of the remark. “You have to rely on the person's emotional intelligence to pick up on the cue,” he says. You might also wait and see what happens. Sometimes the person who made the comment will realize their mistake and apologize.

### **Or...just call it out**

Depending on the severity of the offense, you may decide you're not concerned about the other person's sense of self, says William: “You may feel that you need to just call it out.” And that's fine to do as long as you've weighed the costs. If the person gets their hackles up and gets defensive, “you've now got another piece of information about who this person is,” says Williams.

### **Appeal to someone in authority**

If the comments continue and you feel uncomfortable, you might consider escalating the issue. Williams says there is power in numbers. “Can you find others who have been offended and make the case that the person is creating a hostile climate? If you've tried to deal with it on your own and

haven't had success, you can privately bring it to a senior person." You might say something like: "A whole group of us are having this experience, and we'd like your advice." Just keep in mind, warns Williams, that "as you ratchet it up, you expend more political capital."

## **Principles to Remember**

### **Do:**

- Weigh the consequences of *not* speaking up. Leaving a comment unaddressed may give the person permission to do the same thing again.
- Recognize that if you are in a position of power, you have a responsibility to address offensive comments.
- Ask questions that help the person reflect on what they said and clear up any misunderstandings.

### **Don't:**

- Neglect to think through the political costs, especially if you're the target of the comment.
- Assume the person meant to offend you or anyone else; it's possible that they are clueless.
- Accuse someone of being biased – that's likely to put them on the defensive and unlikely to change their behavior over the long term.

## **Case Study #1: Focus on your reaction**

Ben Brooks had just started a new job at a top-tier management consulting firm, and he and an older colleague were on the phone with the rest of the practice. After Ben made some remarks, the colleague responded with, "You fag!" Ben was so shocked that he didn't even respond. "This was someone I looked up to; he had helped hire me. He didn't know I was gay and seemed to treat it as 'locker room talk,' but I instantly shut down." Ben left the office feeling hurt and angry, "wondering why I had moved across the country to be called a 'fag' at work."

After cooling down, he went back to his colleague's office to discuss the situation. Finding it empty, he left a note saying that he needed to speak with him. When his colleague found him later that day, Ben started off by establishing rapport. "I said that, if I ever offended him, I wanted him to let me know. He agreed." Ben explained why his colleague's earlier comment had upset him. "He said sorry right away, but in a compliance sort of way that wasn't overly genuine." Ben took a deep breath and

shared that he was gay. “When I explained how hurtful it was, he nearly melted in his chair in a puddle of shame,” he says. The colleague was mortified and apologized profusely, and Ben forgave him.

“We all make mistakes and deserve second chances when we take responsibility and apologize,” says Ben, who is now the CEO of PILOT, a tech startup helping managers retain their best talent. “I’m certain he never called anyone a ‘fag’ again.” He and the former colleague remain friends.

### **Case Study #2: Don’t accuse**

Daniel Wagner (names and some details have been changed), the co-owner of an executive search firm based in New York City, has worked for more than a year with Carol, the founder of a youth education organization. In the course of advising her on leadership hires, he’s been frequently taken aback by some of Carol’s comments and requests. For example, she once emailed Daniel’s team to ask them to find photos of job candidates so she could see what they looked like. She also asked that they determine the age of an applicant. After one meeting, Carol commented that the interviewee “dressed like she was Amish.” When discussing an African-American woman up for another job, she expressed concern that her skin color might prevent people from taking her seriously. Daniel and his team were upset by these remarks.

But all along, Daniel’s approach has been to be direct and honest with Carol. “As the senior person on the team, I was constantly trying to insert myself before she got herself in too much trouble,” he recalls. For instance, when she asked for inappropriate information about candidates, he replied, “We don’t request that information because we won’t make a decision based on that. We focus on competencies.” And when she asked for the photos, he said, “Please don’t ask us to do this again. It’s not OK.”

At the same time, he never accused her of being racist or biased. “I didn’t want to make assumptions about her intentions or moral character.... My parents make [the same sort of] comments sometimes, so I’ve been exposed to good people who say inappropriate things.”

Carol’s responses have varied. Sometimes she denies she’d been offensive and says, “You must’ve heard me wrong.” Other times she apologizes. But over time, Daniel’s input seems to have helped. “She says fewer offensive things now. It’s gotten a lot better.”