DEI Strategies: Profiles in Leadership

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Intervening in a bias incident is the shared responsibility of all individuals in our communities and workplace, whether or not we identify with a historically marginalized community. The problem is that taking leadership action and advocating for these issues is *hard*. Individuals must confront and address the real but often unintended effects of bias, productively address the inevitable conflict sparked by diversity, be willing to listen to and change in response to diverse voices, advocate for change in the face of resistance, and (if possible) avoid damaging their relationships with both offenders and targets. In our current culture of cancellation and contempt, leaders often shy away from taking action in the moment for fear of making embarrassing and potentially risky missteps.

Most of the available advice regarding what to say or do when confronting bias incidents is based on the lived experience of targeted populations (e.g., Washington, Birch, & Roberts, 2020). Surprisingly little scientific research has been conducted on what leaders can say to successfully intervene in bias incidents, whether or not they identify with the targeted community (see Sue et al., 2019, for a review of the available literature). While there are some conceptual models in the field of psychology, management, and education (e.g., self-efficacy, issue-selling, bystander intervention, etc.), they are rarely connected to specific and concrete action steps. Perhaps this is why people who witness bias incidents consistently point to one barrier impeding their intervention: that they simply do not know how to intervene successfully (Bennett, Banyard, & Garnhart, 2014). Part of the challenge of determining evidence-based strategies is the need to observe their use (and associated outcomes) in highly realistic situations. Given the highly

sensitive nature of bias incidents, purposefully exposing multiple individuals to the same realistic microaggression is both logistically demanding and ethically problematic.

To address this gap, we undertook a qualitative research study that explored the strategies used by 30 leaders at a mid-Atlantic business school used to address bias incidents. We worked with [Mursion](#) to design customized online avatar-based simulations that provided realistic and confidential practice and feedback on intervening in a bias incident. Voiced by live actors trained in improvisational acting, the 12-minute simulation provided a realistic experience in a low-risk, confidential environment. Learners were instructed to take action after witnessing a colleague in avatar form (i.e., the *perpetrator*) dismiss concerns about the department's commitment to supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion. In the conversation, an avatar of a female colleague of color (i.e., the *target*) was visibly distressed by the colleague's remarks. Audio and video recordings of the simulation were transcribed verbatim and thematically coded for analyses. Coding was a cyclical process of identifying codes, reviewing the conceptual literature, discussing as a research team, and further refining codes. Several of the strategies we found in our data resonated with the conceptual literature (e.g., making the invisible, visible) but some did not (e.g., reduce potential threat).

Simulation actors helped to rate the effectiveness of each action; discrepancies with evaluation of the research team were discussed and resolved. Effectiveness was defined as (1) identifying and stopping the unwanted behavior, (2) overtly supporting the target, and (3) maintaining a positive working relationship with the offender.

The following six effective and three ineffective strategies were identified through our coding (see also Table 1).

Effective Strategies

1. ***Disarm***.[1] Successful leaders interrupted problematic behavior, and made the perpetrator aware of possible harm. Many literally interrupted their colleague by using strategic questions (e.g., "Could you please clarify…?" and "Could you please explain what leads you to say…?") or making statements (e.g., "I don't think anyone would agree that we have done all that we can in this area.") that interrupted the flow of the perpetrator's comments. Disarming usually occurred early in the exchange, often one of the first strategies that the learner used. The strategy was effective, especially if used early in the scenario, because it gave the perpetrator immediate feedback as to how the statement was perceived by the learner and quickly communicated to the target that the learner was an ally. When the disarm strategy was used early, the perpetrator tended to be less defensive and the target less upset than when more time had progressed. While the strategy could still be effective later in the conversation, the perpetrator was more likely to feel attacked/misunderstood and the target was more likely to be angry or "checked out" (i.e., resentfully resigned to being in a hostile environment).

2. ***Advocate/champion***. Successful leaders explicitly state their support for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), especially toward systemic issues. Depending upon the environment, this strategy may or may not be highly effective. In our scenario, learners were already part of a DEI support effort and their commitment to DEI was assumed. By explicitly stating that commitment, the learner effectively put all of the scenario avatars on the "same side" because all shared that commitment (although the perpetrator may have perceived DEI as a "solved" problem). This allowed the learner to promote a collaborative rather than a competitive environment. It also communicated support and allyship to the target. In a more hostile environment, this strategy might have even more impact.

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[1] We are indebted to Sue et al. (2019) for the name of this strategy.

3. ***Amplify***. One of the goals of DEI efforts is to include the voice of the historically marginalized. Successful leaders amplify/support the target's voice by redirecting attention to the target's previously mentioned ideas. This reinforces the value and importance of the target's voice and serves as a model for the perpetrator for future conversations. It also communicates to the target that their voice is heard and valued, strengthening feelings of support. For example, one learner in our study said, "I'd like to hear more about what [target] mentioned earlier about facing challenges that others don't face." Others repeated and credited the target's comments by saying things like, "As [target] just said, our school environment is not perceived as welcoming to all."

4. ***Make the invisible, visible***.[2] Underlying all utterances are meta-communications that indicate how a piece of information is meant to be interpreted (e.g., a threat, call to action, joke, appeal for help, etc.). Effective leaders name and engage the perpetrator's meta-communication so as to direct the perpetrator's attention toward unspoken assumptions. This could mean ignoring some of the words used by the perpetrator and addressing instead the underlying communication. For example, if the perpetrator says, "The dean wants us to focus on this diversity stuff but I think we can all agree that we've done enough there and now we need to focus on our research which is really why we're all here," an effective leader might say, "By saying 'diversity stuff' and implying that diversity issues have been settled and that they have nothing to do with our research, you are communicating that DEI issues have all been satisfactorily addressed and that they don't have anything to do with the institution's main research mission and I think we should examine those assumptions." In contrast, engaging the words rather than the meta-communication might lead a learner to focus on <u>what</u> has been "done" about DEI rather than on the underlying attitudes of dismissal and irrelevance (see below, *Engaging the distraction*) which is a very different and more

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limited conversation. By engaging the meta-communication, the learner also communicates that they will hold the perpetrator accountable for more systemic and problematic assumptions.

5.   ***Reduce potential threat***. Self-deprecate or apologize in order to take some of the "sting" off of the to-be-delivered criticism. Leaders used a variety of tactics such as, "I don't want to interrupt but…" and "Sorry to disagree with you so openly, [perpetrator] but.." and "I'm no expert in this area…" and "I hope this doesn't come across as accusatory because that isn't my intent." This strategy of intellectual humility was surprisingly effective. It immediately softened the blow of the criticism that followed and made it less likely that the perpetrator felt attacked. Using self-diminishing speech is a typical strategy for those low in power such as women (CITE?) and its use indicates that the speaker is not seeking to threaten the individual or the social order in which the individual is located. It thus frees the perpetrator up to listen to the learner's words without feeling attacked as a person.

6.   ***Focus on impact, not intent***. Make perpetrator aware that the impact of their actions and words are more important than their intentions. Effective leaders combined this strategy with the *Disarm* strategy to convey that (a) the perpetrator's intentions are invisible to others while only their actions/words are visible and (b) even if the intentions are positive, the impact can be harmful, and (c) that the perpetrator bears some responsibility for the harmful impact of even positively intended words. By separating impact from intent, learners were able to shift the focus of the conversation from the perpetrator's character to their behavior, making them feel supported and understood and therefore more open to aligning behavior (words) with their positive intentions. It also helped the perpetrator engage in perspective taking. For example, one learner said, "I don't know if you realize it, [perpetrator], but some people could hear what you are saying and interpret it as not caring about DEI." Another said, "Can you imagine if someone who didn't have a positive

experience heard you say that? From their perspective, you would sound like you were dismissing their concerns." This strategy also opened an avenue for the target to share her experience in a non-threatening way.

<u>Ineffective Strategies</u>

1.   **Engage the distraction**. On May 2, 1975, Toni Morrison delivered a speech at Portland State University in which she discussed the nature of racism. She stated that the function of racism is distraction: "[Racism] keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and so you spend 20 years proving that you do… None of that is necessary" (Morrison, 1975). This is the essence of "engage the distraction." The learner gets distracted by the perpetrator's surface communications and therefore gets pulled away from the deeper DEI issue at hand, which also often results in a two-person conversation between the learner and the perpetrator and leaves out the voice of the target. Engaging the distraction is the opposite of making the invisible, visible. Instead of addressing the meta-communication or lack of interest/belief in DEI concerns and dismissal of other perspectives, the learner focuses on the perpetrator's rationale or surface arguments. By doing so, the learner falls into the trap of engaging so much with the perpetrator that the target's central concerns go unheard and/or unresolved. For example, one learner insisted that the perpetrator was wrong about rankings and pressed the perpetrator to get better data. This strategy suggests that it's okay to ignore the perspective of the marginalized if the "data" suggests that the system is still functioning well. The net result is that the perpetrator feels attacked and the target feels disenfranchised. Not surprisingly, this particular learner was unaware of the effect of their strategy and rated themselves as having successfully addressed the bias incident.

2.   **Ignore target**. Related to "engage the distraction," the learner is focused so much on the perpetrator that the target isn't included in the conversation. Tactics include posing questions to the target but not waiting for answers, speaking on behalf of the target (e.g., answering questions posed by the perpetrator to the target), and restating the target's words as their own (e.g., "I think what Dee meant to say was…"). The net result is that the target feels unsupported. While this strategy can be an effective way to stop unwanted behavior and even maintain a good relationship with the perpetrator, by ignoring the target, the learner reinforces a system in which the target has no voice.

3.   **React, not act**. It is worth noting that learners were tasked with addressing the bias incident. There was no option to ignore the bias incident. To guard against the possibility of inaction, avatar-actors were instructed to directly address learners who remained silent with questions such as, "Don't you agree?" and "Do you have any thoughts on what we're focusing on in this committee?". Several learners were visibly uncomfortable with taking action and later, in the debrief, remarked that they would probably not have said anything "in the real world." One ineffective strategy that they used was to restrict themselves to reacting when questioned by the perpetrator or colleague and to avoid initiating action. For example, in response to the question "Don't you agree?" one learner said vaguely, "Well, there's always more we could do" while others immediately suggested that the colleague was better positioned to answer. This reactive strategy tended to be perceived as implicit support by the perpetrator and complicit acceptance by the colleague.

Table 1. Effective strategies in green. Ineffective strategies in red.

Strategy	Description	Example
Disarm	Interrupt problematic behavior, and make perpetrator aware of harm	● *Well,' diversity stuff.' I mean, don't we have a clear statement about the diversity policies and what we're trying to do in a very affirmative way?* ● *I would prefer if we not call it diversity stuff.* ● *There are people who might be offended by what you just said.*
Advocate/ Champion	Explicitly state one's support for EDI, especially toward systemic issues.	● *I don't necessarily think we need to get into [target]'s personal situation. I think instead, maybe we can elevate the conversation to talk about things that we can do to prevent others from feeling the way that [target] does.* ● *I for one believe that we need to work a lot harder to make our community more inclusive.* ● *I really think that's the focus of this committee is to look at structural changes, cultural changes*
Amplify	Support target's voice by redirecting attention to target's previously mentioned ideas	● *[Interrupting perpetrator], if you don't mind, I was going to add that I, too, have heard some similar things from colleagues that [target] has mentioned.* ● *I'd love to hear your [target's] ideas, actually. In fact, we need to write these down to share with the faculty so that we can do a better job of supporting everyone who has been excluded.* ● *[Target], could you repeat that, please. It is important.*
Make the invisible visible	Name and engage meta-communication	● *What I heard was an insult in "you are doing very well for yourself" and also maybe putting all of the diversity and inclusion efforts on your shoulders to be responsible rather than the community being responsible for our unit.* ● *Wait, you said that some people are just being entrepreneurial with DEI initiatives. What do you mean by that?*
Reduce potential threat	Self-deprecate to reduce defensive reaction to criticism	● *Sorry to disagree with you so openly, Gordon, but ...* ● *I don't mean to interrupt, but...* ● *I'm not an expert on this but...*
Focus on impact, not intent	Make perpetrator aware that the impact of actions/words are greater than their intentions	● *While we all would like to think that we are doing a great job with this [EDI] effort, the perception is as important as reality.* ● *Imagine how someone from a disenfranchised group might feel by the statement that DEI 'isn't a problem anymore.'*
Engage the distraction	Engage the perpetrator's arguments instead of target's central concerns	● [After perpetrator says that we should celebrate our accomplishments and get back to our scholarly work]. *I'm interested in [rankings], our students are interested in it. I'd like to know what our goals are. What are we shooting for?* ● *Diversity wins these days. Every company we deal knows it.*
Ignore target	Focus on perpetrator and ignore target	● Answer questions that perpetrator directed at target ● *What do you think, [target]? I think we should be proud of what we've done but we have more to do.*

React, not act	Respond to the actions of others rather than initiating action	● *[In response to direct question] I'm not sure. What do you think, [target]?* ● *Well, a lot of people have different thoughts on this.*

References

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