

**Responding to Biased or Offensive Comments**

**Judith Kaye Training and Consulting**

[**http://judithkayconsulting.com**](http://judithkayconsulting.com)

401-258-0475

The following materials were compiled for a workshop at the Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom Annual Conference, Nov. 3, 2019.

**Reasons We Don’t Speak Up**

 I might say the wrong thing or offend I’m afraid to go against the group

 someone I don’t know enough about the topic

 It will make things worse It will cause tension at work

 I am too shocked or angry I might be the next target

 I might be viewed as oversensitive There’s no point; they’ll never change

 I don’t want to sound like the PC police I’ll get too emotional

 I don’t feel safe

**Which fears/obstacles get in your way? What can you do to lessen their influence?**

**Bias and the Brain**



**Pre-frontal Cortex Amygdala**

ReasoningEmotion – fear, anxiety,

Empathy aggression

Impulse control Fight-Flight-Freeze Response

Conscience Binary Thinking

Flexibility Survival Instinct

Problem-solving

**What helps you calm your Fight-Flight-Freeze response and activate your higher brain?**

**What’s Your Goal?**

**(Taking into account the circumstances and people involved)**

 Get Behavior to stop De-escalate

 Act true to my values Engage in dialogue, seek understanding

 Protect myself or others from harm Set a limit, enforce policies

 Stand up for a targeted person or group Help someone with a task

 Signal objection or voice disagreement Educate or correct misinformation

**Being clear about your goal can help you choose an effective response.**

**Response Strategies**

* Breathe, notice your feelings and body sensations, choose to engage your higher brain
* Delay your response if you need to vent to someone or think through your options
* Ask: “How an I respond wisely without attacking?”
* Ask: “What is my goal and what is possible here?
* Model authenticity, honesty, and respect; judgment may activate the other person’s amygdala!

Call a Time-Out “I need to stop for a moment & process that before I say anything.” “I’m

 upset about what you said & need to collect myself.” “This feels pretty awkward.”

Assume good intent/ “I know you didn’t mean harm, but that actually hurts”. “You probably are trying

Explain impact to be funny, but I saw someone turn red & leave the room.”

Be sincerely curious “What are you trying to say?” “What makes that funny to you?” “You know that

 upsets me; I wonder why you would keep doing it?”

Use “I” language “I feel uncomfortable (embarrassed, insulted) when I hear that.”

Interrupt and redirect “Whoa! Let’s not go there!” “Let’s change the subject.” “Let’s get back to work.”

Universalize “I think there are people like that in every group.” “Everyone does that at times.”

Individualize “That’s a pretty broad claim. Is there someone specific you are referring to?”

Empathize “It sounds like you’re worried about losing your job.” “I want to feel safe too.”

Set limits “That violates our policy.” “We don’t tell those jokes here.” “if you continue

 doing that, we’ll have to leave.”

Appeal to shared values “I know you are open-minded & that doesn’t sound like you.” “Mom & Dad

or goals didn’t raise us that way.” “If everyone feels valued, we’ll get better results.

Request or model an “I’d prefer we call people by their name and not use labels.” “If someone refers

Alternative to ‘illegal aliens’, respond using the term “undocumented folks.”

Voice objection “Actually, I don’t agree.” “I don’t feel that way at all.” “My experience is very

 different.” “That’s not a nice thing to say.”

Educate “That’s a very common misconception – I had it at one time too.” “That word

 actually has some interesting history.” “Many people say that’s a myth.”

Enlist allies “That memo sounds offensive to me; did anyone else have that reaction?”

Build on relationship “I value working with you & don’t want anything to get in the way.” “Those

 remarks are putting distance between us and I love you too much for that to happen.”

Use humor “Did you know that I’m a woman?”

**Which of these responses have you used? Which do you want to try?**

**Practicum**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Example** | **Possible Response(s)** | **Factors** |
| “Where are you from? No, where are you really from?” |  |  |
| “You’re not like other Muslims(Blacks, Jews, Mexicans) |  |  |
| “People on welfare are justlazy.” |  |  |
| “Is that a man or a woman?” |  |  |
| “You don’t look Jewish.” “Youdon’t act gay.” “You don’t soundBlack.” |  |  |
| “Foreign workers are taking allour jobs.” |  |  |
| “You’re Muslim – what do you people think about the issue?” |  |  |
| “That’s so ghetto (gay, retarded,lame, crazy) |  |  |
| “Islam encourages violence andconquest.” |  |  |
| “I admire Jews’ talent with money.” |  |  |
| A clerk asks a Black customer for two forms of ID, but doesn’t askyou (you’re white) |  |  |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |

**Dealing with Defensiveness**

**“You’re being oversensitive (paranoid, exaggerating).”**

* You might be right; regardless, it’s really an ouch for me.
* Even if I am, I’d appreciate your hearing me out.
* Now I actually feel worse (dismissed, invalidated). Is that what you were aiming for?

**“That wasn’t my intent/you misunderstood me.”**

* I guess the impact was different than what you intended.
* That may be so; regardless, it was off-putting to me.
* I’m open to hearing what you meant, and I’d appreciate your acknowledging how it hit me.

**“I didn’t mean anything by it; I was only joking.”**

* That may be so; it still doesn’t feel (sound) funny to me.
* It didn’t hit my funny bone but actually stepped on my toe/heart.

**“They’re a good person and would never say anything prejudiced.”**

* I know you wouldn’t mistreat someone on purpose. You might not be aware that some people feel offended by that kind of comment.
* We all have some unconscious biases that sometimes get expressed unintentionally.

**“I’m not privileged – I worked hard to get where I am.”**

* I’m sure you did. I understand privilege to mean something different than having it easy. It’s more about not having to deal with extra obstacles because of prejudice.

**Have you tried any of these rejoinders? How did it go?**

**Recovering Gracefully When You Offend**

 “You seem upset by what I said. I’d like to hear more.”

 “What an insensitive thing for me to say. I’m sorry.”

 “That was unskillful (insensitive, wrong) of me. I’m sorry.”

 “I didn’t realize how charged that term is; thanks for telling me.”

 “I get that my words had a negative impact on you regardless of my intent. I apologize.”

 “The last thing I want is to make anyone uncomfortable. Let me try that again.”

 “What can I do to make amends/repair?

 Other:

**Which of the above have you said to someone else? What else might you say?**

**About the Author**

**Judy Kaye, JD** is co-founder and co-leader of the RI chapter of the Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom. She is a diversity practitioner with over 25 years’ experience in a wide range of industries, including business, health care, higher education, government, and the nonprofit sector.

Judy designs and conducts workshops on topics such as diversity and inclusion, implicit bias, sexual harassment prevention, and culturally sensitive patient care. She also facilitates strategic planning retreats and group process, and provides continuing education seminars to human resources directors and other professionals. From 2011-2013 she served as Diversity & Equal Employment Opportunity Coordinator at Lifespan, an academic healthcare system in RI.

A graduate of Brown University and Harvard Law School, Judy received additional training through the Anti-Defamation League’s A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE Institute, the National MultiCultural Institute (NMCI), National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI), Public Conversations Project (PCP), National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ), and Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination (MCAD).

Prior to starting her consulting business, Judy practiced law for 10 years on behalf of low income tenants.