



For U.S. health care providers

How to Respond Empathetically When You're Called Out for Exclusive Behavior

A tool for managers and team leaders

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GOAL

Activate your rational brain and engage fully in the conversation, respond with empathy, and commit to change after being called out for exclusive behavior to ensure all employees feel safe and respected.

INTENDED USERS

Manager, team lead

TIME REQUIRED

5 minutes to review

HOW TO USE THIS TOOL

Use this tool after an exclusive behavior is brought to your attention by an employee. Follow the talking points and tips to ensure that your employees feels heard and validated. Then, commit to changing your behavior and offer a way to repair any harm done.

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Why it's hard to listen to feedback — and why leaders need to do it anyway

Exclusive behavior—even subtle and unintentional comments—can make team members feel unwelcome and unsafe. Because this behavior is often unintentional, leaders must rely on the people around them to point out mistakes and hold leaders accountable for improving.

However, it's often difficult to receive feedback on exclusive behavior because it runs contrary to many beliefs people have about themselves, causing cognitive dissonance. People tend to believe they are “good people,” and that only “bad people” can act in harmful ways. People frequently conclude that being called out for exclusive behavior implies they are a “bad” person, rather than acknowledging that all people make mistakes. Responding to feedback effectively requires first accepting that all people are capable of perpetuating systems of oppression—and are capable of change.

Further, being called out for exclusive behavior can feel like a social threat. This triggers the emotional part of the brain, the amygdala, to activate a fight-or-flight response. This “amygdala hijack” limits a person's ability to respond rationally and leads to an emotional response, which may include aggression, embarrassment, or defensiveness. To respond to feedback effectively, leaders must learn to regulate their emotional responses and activate the rational part of their brains.

It's particularly important for managers to engage with feedback because employees rely on them to create a safe and inclusive work environment. When team members share feedback, they are demonstrating trust in their managers and their ability to change. It's crucial to maintain that trust by responding empathetically. This tool will walk you through three steps to respond when you're called out for exclusive behavior: activate your rational brain and engage fully in the conversation, respond with empathy, and commit to change.

STEP ONE

Activate your rational brain and engage fully

| Component | Sample talking points | Tips |
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| <p>01 Regulate your emotional response.</p> <p>Your initial response may be to shut down, defend yourself, or be embarrassed. Stabilize your emotions to allow for a productive and rational conversation.</p> | <p>“Could you allow me a moment to ground myself so I can process what you’re sharing?”</p> <p>If you’re unable to contain your emotional response, take the time you need to process how you’re feeling, schedule dedicated time to discuss the encounter, and then come back to your employee: “I recognize I am reacting strongly to this, would you mind if I took this away, reflected on it, and pulled back up with you to have a discussion when my emotions are at bay?”</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do notice your automatic physical and emotional response. For example, are you sweating or clenching your fists? Are you feeling embarrassed or angry? • Do use a deliberate motion to interrupt your automatic physical or emotional response and re-engage the rational part of your brain (for example, take a sip of water, place your hands on the table, or take a deep breath). • Do not allow your emotional response to be overwhelmingly visible to the employee. You do not want the employee to have to navigate your own emotional response. |
| <p>02 Listen fully.</p> <p>Understand that your employee is putting trust in you and your ability to improve. Actively listen to what your employee is sharing.</p> | <p>“Let me close out my email and phone notifications so I can be fully present for what you’re sharing with me.”</p> <p>If you’re unable to give the conversation the time it deserves now: “Thank you for sharing this with me, I want to hear your feedback and thoughts. Could we set aside dedicated time to give this conversation the space and attention it deserves?”</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do put away distractions. • Do thank your employee for sharing. • Do not interrupt what your employee is sharing. • Do not invalidate the employees’ emotions by discounting what they are feeling or asking them to calm down. |

STEP TWO

Respond with empathy

| Component | Sample talking points | Tips |
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| <p>03 Reflect on what was shared and thank the employee. Acknowledge the courage it takes to share sensitive feedback. Express your regret for the misstep and show you understand your wrongdoing.</p> | <p>“I want to make sure that I have fully understood what you’ve shared with me: when I said/did X, it communicated that Y, and that made you/our team feel Z. Is that fair? Did I miss anything?”</p> <p>If you’re unable to fully understand the implications of your actions: “I appreciate you sharing how my words/actions impacted you. I will reflect on the power my actions/words hold, so I can act more thoughtfully and intentionally in the future.”</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do thank the employee for bringing this up with you and show yourself as a safe person for these conversations in the future. • Do not begin to try to explain your rationale for doing what you did. • Do not ask the employee to explain more about why what you did offended them or made them feel excluded. Do not make the conversation an interrogation of them or overburden them. |
| <p>04 Accept responsibility. When issuing an apology, the most important part is accepting responsibility and acknowledging you have done wrong.</p> | <p>“It is my responsibility as a leader to make our team feel included, valued, and respected. I can see that when I said/did X that I was not leading inclusively and that I made you feel Y.”</p> <p>If you’re unable to fully apologize in the moment due to a public setting: “Thank you for sharing this with me. I appreciate your bringing this up and I apologize” and later reach out to the employee to reiterate your thanks and accept responsibility for your misstep.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do acknowledge the difference between intent and impact. • Do verbally recognize what you have done. • Do not minimize what you did and write it off as inconsequential. • Do not claim your mistake was a misinterpreted joke. • Do not make excuses for your behavior. • Do not over-apologize and make your employee care for you. This is about the affected employee, not you. |




STEP THREE

Commit to change


| Component | Sample talking points | Tips |
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| <p>05 Offer ways to repair any damage. Provide some initial options for what you might do differently. Commit yourself to working to be more intentional with your words and actions in the future.</p> | <p>“Looking forward, I want to do better as a leader, so you feel safe and included on this team. I will acknowledge this in our next team meeting and encourage other employees to provide feedback to me and each other.”</p> <p>If you are unable to provide actionable steps in the moment, let your team member know you would like to dedicate time to thinking through what you can do better and how you will do it.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do set an action plan for yourself to improve, such as learning about bias and inequities, reviewing past communications, or setting time for self-reflection. • Do ask the affected individual if there is anything they would like to see from you specifically (if you have a sufficiently close working relationship). • Do not set an action plan and fail to follow through. |

Source: Effective Apologies Include Six Elements, Associate for Psychological Science, May 24, 2016, <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/news/minds-business/effective-apologies-include-six-elements.html>; Knight R., You've Been Called Out for a Microaggression. What Do You Do?, Harvard Business Review, July 24, 2020, <https://hbr.org/2020/07/youve-been-called-out-for-a-microaggression-what-do-you-do>.

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