

Responding to Oppression in Our Work

Responding as the oppressor.

None of us can escape our blind spots, and mistakes in interacting with others are inevitable. In such situations, your response is crucial. Though being called out for oppressive language or behavior can be embarrassing, it is also an opportunity to learn and repair relationships. Instead of acting defensively, 1) **listen** to the person's concern and acknowledge that their experience of feeling oppressed is real, 2) **apologize** for your oppressive language or behavior, and 3) continue to **educate** yourself on privilege and oppression. This laser talk might help you in your response:

When responding directly to someone who is being oppressed

Engage: Recently, I was involved in an incident in which I _____ (name oppressive behavior).

State the Problem: I'm not certain why I said/did _____, but I am recognizing that my behavior was disrespectful and inappropriate.

Illustrate the solution: Part of why I participate in RESULTS is the organization's values in fighting oppression. As our Anti-Oppression Values Statement says, "Poverty cannot end as long as oppression exists." I see that what I did was not in line with those values in that it showed an insensitivity toward you as a person of _____. In that situation, it would have been better for me to have _____.

Call to action: Thank you for bringing this to my attention. I know that my actions hurt you. I am sorry and will work to avoid such behavior in the future. Will you accept my apology?

or

Engage: Recently, I was involved in an incident in which I _____ (name oppressive behavior).

State the Problem: I'm not sure why I said/did _____, but I am recognizing that my behavior was disrespectful and inappropriate. I'm not sure how to fix the problem I've caused.

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Illustrate the solution: Part of why I participate in RESULTS is the organization's values in fighting oppression. As our Anti-Oppression Values Statement says, "Poverty cannot end as long as oppression exists." I see that what I did was not in line with those values. I want to make amends and learn how to avoid this behavior in the future.

Call to action: Who may I talk to on RESULTS staff to help with this situation?

Additional guidance on responding to oppression as the oppressor from Ijeoma Oluo's [*So You Want to Talk About Race*](#):

- **Listen.** *First and foremost, if someone is telling you something about yourself and your actions and you feel your hackles rising, take that as a sign that you need to stop and listen. If your blood pressure rose too quickly to really hear what was being said, take a few deep breaths, ask the person to repeat themselves if necessary, and listen again. Don't add to what the person is saying, don't jump to conclusions, don't immediately think, "Oh, you think I'm a monster now," just try to actually hear what they are trying to communicate to you.*
- **Set your intentions aside.** *Your intentions have little to no impact on the way in which your actions may have harmed others. Using an example, you may not have intended to hit someone else's car with your own, but your intentions do not negate the harm or hurt caused to the other party. Do not try to absolve yourself of responsibility with your good intentions.*
- **Try to hear the impact of what you have done.** *Don't just hear the action: "You consistently speak over me in work meetings, and you do not do that to other people in our meetings." That is easy to brush off as, "I just didn't agree with you," or, "I didn't mean to, I was just excited about a point I was trying to make. Don't make a big deal out of nothing." Try to also hear the impact: "Your bias is invalidating my professional expertise and making me feel singled out and unappreciated in a way which compounds all of the many ways I'm made to feel this way as a woman or person of color in the workplace."*

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- **Remember that you do not have all of the pieces.** *You are not living as a person of color or as a person from another group experiencing oppression. You will never be able to fully empathize with the pain your actions may have caused. Nothing will get you there. Do not discount someone's complaint because their emotions seem foreign to you.*
- **Nobody owes you a debate.** *It is very hard for people who regularly experience oppression to call it out. Sometimes, that is the most they can do. And while you may really want to get it all sorted out right then and there, understand that when you ask to "talk it out" you are asking for more emotional labor from somebody who is already hurt. It is nice if you get it, and you should be grateful, but it is not owed you. You can still give this serious thought. You can still look deep inside yourself, you can still Google for more insight (remember, it's highly unlikely that anything you've done has not been done before), even if the person who brought this to your attention does not want to engage further.*
- **Nobody owes you a relationship.** *Even if you've recognized where you've been oppressive, worked to make amends, and learned from your mistakes, the person that you harmed does not owe you a relationship of any kind. They do not have to stick around to see all the progress you've made.*
- **Remember that you are not the only one hurt.** *Yes, it hurts to know that somebody thinks you are being racist, sexist, or oppressive. But you were not the first one hurt here—it is the deep hurt of oppression that forced this person to confront you. Do not make this about your pain at being called out.*
- **If you can see where you have been oppressive, or if you can see where your actions have caused harm, apologize and mean it.** *Think about how you can make amends if possible, and how you can avoid those same harmful actions in the future.*

Ask for Support or Report What Happened. Use [this online anti-oppression reporting form](#) to report a RESULTS-related incident of oppression and ask for help, or just to inform us of a RESULTS-related incident or situation you want RESULTS to know about. In addition to asking for help, learning from you about how incidents are handled effectively can benefit the whole RESULTS network.