



5 Minute Safety Talk - 4

What can you do if you see harassment?

Today's talk is aimed at those of us in the workplace who may see harassment taking place. A bystander is someone who is present at an event or incident but does not take part. With respect to workplace violence and harassment, the term bystander also includes someone with knowledge of an event or incident who doesn't report it. A bystander is not a perpetrator. But is a bystander guilty through knowledge or inaction? That's where the grey area exists.

The bystander effect has been studied extensively. When a person needs help or is in danger, most bystanders are reluctant to intervene and simply stand by without assisting. In fact, the more observers there are, the less the chance of any one person intervening. People say to themselves "someone else will intervene." In critical situations, intervention is much more likely if only one observer is present.

Why does this happen?

Why do bystanders at work ignore a colleague who is being bullied, sexually harassed or otherwise mistreated? Bystander apathy could occur because the bad behaviour has become "normalized", or because of fear of retaliation by the perpetrator. The bystander may not trust the complaint process or that they themselves will be protected. Or the bystander may rely on the perpetrator for advancement in the workplace because of their status.

Instead of feeling powerless, there are many actions a bystander can take.

If you observe someone being victimized, you have a number of options for action. Generally, we would not advise confronting the harasser in the moment, because it can escalate and put you, as the bystander, in jeopardy.





But it is not hard to say something like, “That joke wasn’t funny.” You may have seen the “so not cool” buttons that are floating around out there. This would be another non-confrontational way to let a person know that they crossed a line.

Another option is to disrupt the situation, such as by loudly dropping a book or asking the victim to come away for some reason. Invent a task you need the harasser’s target to help you with. (There is a widely shared video on the Internet that shows a guy called Snackman defusing a fight on the subway by standing between the combatants, eating chips. This might not work on the set.)

Another approach is to talk to the harasser later. You want to ask questions, not accuse. You might say, “Were you aware of how you came off in that conversation?” or “I heard what you said to her. Why did you do that?”

You can also comment on the behaviour to your co-workers: “Did you notice that? Am I the only one who sees it this way?”

If you want to be a defender, think about approaching the target of harassment. Show that person that you saw what happened. As a colleague, you might say: “I noticed that happened. Are you O.K. with that?” You can make that person feel less isolated by encouraging them to ask for help, go with them to get help, or provide them with information about where to go for help. You can also offer to speak up as a witness if the person chooses to pursue a complaint.

Too often victims blame themselves, so a bystander saying, “This isn’t your fault, you didn’t do anything wrong,” can be really important support. So, don’t just be a bystander. Be an “upstander.” An upstander is a person who speaks or acts in support of an individual or cause, particularly someone who intervenes on behalf of a person being attacked or bullied.



We can encourage upstander culture by ensuring that everyone on set knows how and to whom to make a report. Also, remember that most bullies are cowards and when confronted, are likely to back down. At the very least:

- Do not stand by and watch
- Make it clear to your colleagues that you won't be involved in the behaviour
- Do not encourage bullying behaviour by harassing, teasing or spreading gossip about others, verbally or on social networking sites like Facebook
- Do not acknowledge, reply or forward messages or photos that could be hurtful or embarrassing to a colleague.

Bystander intervention is not about putting on your cape and saving the day. It's about having a conversation with a colleague about the way they talk about women or act toward their co-workers.

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