

# Bystander Response Phrases

What to say when you witness exclusion,  
microaggressions, or harm at work.



*"Knowing what to say in the moment is a skill.  
This guide gives you the words."*

# How to use this guide

Most people want to speak up when they witness exclusion, bias, or harm at work, but they freeze. They do not know what to say, worry about making it worse, or fear looking foolish.

This guide gives you simple, practical phrases you can use in the moment, and after. These are not scripts to memorise. Adapt them to your voice and the situation. The goal is to interrupt harm, support the person affected, and signal that the behaviour is not acceptable.

## What bystander response is, and is not

- IT IS: a low-stakes way to interrupt harm without turning it into a tribunal.
- IT IS: checking in on someone after a difficult moment, hours or days later.
- IT IS: a private, honest conversation with someone whose behaviour concerned you.
- IT IS NOT: public humiliation, a formal complaint, or a substitute for HR processes.
- IT IS NOT: something only managers or EDI leads are responsible for.

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### Section 1

## In-the-moment responses

These phrases interrupt what is happening without escalating it. The goal is to slow the moment down, signal that something was off, and give the targeted person breathing room.

### Tone matters more than the words

- Keep your tone calm and curious, not accusatory.
- Do not position yourself as judge or expert.
- Short is better than long, let the pause do the work.

### 1.1, When someone is talked over or ignored

*A colleague raises an idea in a meeting. Someone interrupts them, or the group moves on without acknowledging what they said.*

**REDIRECT ATTENTION BACK**

- › *“I want to go back to what [Name] was saying. I don't think we finished that thought.”*
- › *“Hold on, [Name] was mid-point. Can you finish what you were saying?”*
- › *“Can we just pause. I think [Name] had more to add.”*

**1.2, When an idea is credited to the wrong person**

*An idea raised by one person is picked up and credited to someone else, a common pattern in meetings, often affecting people from marginalised groups.*

**RE-CREDIT THE ORIGINAL SPEAKER**

- › *“Good point, and building on what [Name] said earlier...”*
- › *“Just to credit that, [Name] raised this a few minutes ago.”*
- › *“I think [Name] was the first to mention that. Worth noting.”*

**1.3, When a comment is biased or stereotyping**

*Someone makes a comment that rests on a stereotype or generalisation about a group: race, gender, age, class, disability, or nationality.*

**QUESTION THE ASSUMPTION CALMLY**

- › *“Interesting, what makes you say that?”*
- › *“I'm not sure that's been my experience. Where's that coming from?”*
- › *“I'd push back on that a bit. That's a broad statement.”*
- › *“Let's not go there. It's a generalisation that doesn't really hold.”*

**1.4, When someone is excluded from the conversation**

*In a meeting or group chat, one person is consistently not invited in, asked for their view, or acknowledged.*

**INVITE THEM IN DIRECTLY**

- › *“[Name], what's your view on this? We haven't heard from you yet.”*
- › *“I'd like to hear what [Name] thinks before we move on.”*
- › *“[Name], you've worked on something similar, what's your take?”*

**1.5, When someone is spoken to condescendingly**

*A colleague is addressed in a way that is patronising, belittling, or disrespectful, in person or in writing.*

**NAME THE DYNAMIC**

- › *“The tone there felt sharp. Maybe I'm reading it wrong.”*
- › *“I think we can have this conversation more constructively.”*
- › *“[Name] is raising a fair point. Can we engage with what they're saying?”*

## 1.6, When a 'joke' causes visible discomfort

Someone makes a joke at the expense of a person's identity or a group that person belongs to. The humour relies on a stereotype.

### DECLINE TO LAUGH AND NAME IT

- › "I'm not going to laugh at that one, to be honest."
- › "That kind of humour tends to land badly. I'd leave it."
- › "I know it wasn't meant badly, but jokes like that can sting."

## Section 2

# When not to intervene in the moment

Stepping in is not always the right call. Sometimes intervening can make things worse: for the targeted person, or for you. Knowing when to hold back is just as important as knowing when to speak.

### Consider holding back if...

- The targeted person is already handling it, do not step over them.
- Speaking up would put them in a spotlight they have not asked for.
- Your voice would add heat, not clarity.
- You are not sure enough of the context and risk misreading publicly.
- A power imbalance means intervening could rebound on the targeted person.
- You are too activated to respond calmly in the moment.

If you decide not to intervene in the moment, this is not the end of your responsibility. Make a note of what happened and choose a different route, a private check-in, a one-to-one conversation, or a formal report.

### Before you speak, ask yourself

#### Four quick check questions

- Whose interests does this serve: mine, or theirs?
- Is this the right moment, or is there a better one coming?
- Have I checked whether this person wants to be helped?
- Am I calm enough to do this well?

## Section 3

# After-the-fact check-ins

You did not speak up at the time, or you did, but you want to check the person is alright. Checking in afterwards is one of the most important things a bystander can do. It says: I noticed, and I care.

*There is no expiry date on a check-in. It can happen within minutes or days later.*

### 3.1, The direct check-in

Keep it brief, specific, and non-intrusive. Do not interrogate. Do not project how they should be feeling.

#### OPENING A CHECK-IN

- › *“Hey, I wanted to check in after that meeting. How are you doing?”*
- › *“I noticed what happened earlier. I just wanted to say I saw it.”*
- › *“I didn't say anything at the time and I've been thinking about that. Are you okay?”*
- › *“That comment earlier didn't sit right with me. How did you find it?”*

### 3.2, When they want to talk

If the person opens up, your role is to listen, not solve, minimise, or compare.

#### HOLDING SPACE WITHOUT FIXING

- › *“That sounds really frustrating. I'm glad you're telling me.”*
- › *“That's not okay. I hear you.”*
- › *“You don't have to minimise that, it was worth noting.”*
- › *“What would be most useful right now: to vent, think through options, or just be heard?”*

### 3.3, When they say they are fine

Sometimes people deflect. Do not push, but leave the door open.

#### LEAVING THE DOOR OPEN

- › *“Okay, I just wanted you to know I'm here if that changes.”*
- › *“Fair enough. I'll leave it there, but the offer stands.”*
- › *“Understood. Just wanted to check in.”*

### 3.4, When you wish you had spoken up

If you stayed quiet and feel bad about it, say so. Honesty is more useful than pretending it did not happen.

#### OWNING YOUR SILENCE

- › *“I didn't say anything at the time and I've been sitting with that. I'm sorry I didn't.”*
- › *“I wish I had stepped in. I just wanted you to know it wasn't because I didn't notice.”*
- › *“I've been thinking about what happened. I should have said something. Can I do anything now?”*

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## Section 4

# One-to-one conversations with the person who caused harm

This is the hardest part, and where real culture change happens. If you are going to have this conversation, do it privately, calmly, and soon after the incident. You are not positioning yourself as an authority. You are simply naming something you observed, from your own perspective.

## Before you start

- Choose a private moment, not in front of others.
- Lead with observation, not accusation.
- Use 'I noticed' rather than 'You always' or 'That was wrong'.
- Be specific about what was said or done, not a character judgement.
- Leave room for their response. You may not have the full picture.
- Keep the conversation focused, one incident, one conversation.

## 4.1, Opening the conversation

### OPENING A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

- › *“Can I have a quick word privately? It won't take long.”*
- › *“I wanted to mention something from earlier. Is now a good moment?”*
- › *“Something happened in the meeting I wanted to raise with you directly.”*

## 4.2, Naming what you observed

### DESCRIBE, DON'T JUDGE

- › *“When you said [X], I noticed it landed badly with some people in the room.”*
- › *“I wanted to flag something. The comment about [X] came across sharper than I think you meant.”*
- › *“I don't think you realised, but [X] is something that tends to sting for people in that situation.”*

## 4.3, When they get defensive

### STAY CALM AND SPECIFIC

- › *“I hear you. I'm not saying you meant harm, just that it landed that way.”*
- › *“I'm not trying to accuse you. I'd want someone to tell me if I'd done the same thing.”*
- › *“Take your time with it. I'm not expecting you to agree straight away.”*

## 4.4, Closing the conversation

### CLOSE WITHOUT DRAMA

- › *“That’s all I wanted to say. I appreciate you hearing me out.”*
- › *“I just wanted to put it out there. What you do with it is up to you.”*
- › *“Thanks for not getting annoyed at me for raising it. I know it’s awkward.”*

## Section 5

# Follow-up steps

Bystander response is not a single act. What happens afterwards matters too. Use this checklist depending on what you did in the moment.

### If you intervened in the moment

- Check in privately with the person targeted, ask how they are.
- Do not narrate your intervention as heroic. Ask what they need.
- If they did not want intervention, acknowledge that and apologise for the intrusion.
- Make a brief note of what happened, in case it becomes relevant later.

### If you had a private conversation with the person who caused harm

- Do not gossip about the conversation or broadcast it.
- Give them a chance to do better, watch for whether behaviour changes.
- If it continues or escalates, consider a formal route.
- Reflect: what would you do differently next time?

### If you chose not to intervene

- Decide what you will do instead, check-in, private conversation, or report.
- Do not use 'I didn't intervene' as the end of the story.
- For serious incidents, speak to your manager, HR, or EDI lead.

### In all cases

- Look after yourself. Witnessing or responding to harm is stressful.
- Talk to someone you trust if you need to debrief.
- Recognise that doing something, however imperfect, matters.

## When to escalate formally

### Escalate to HR, management, or an EDI lead when

- The incident was serious: harassment, discrimination, threatened or actual violence.
- The behaviour is repeated and bystander response has not changed it.
- The targeted person has asked for support in making a formal complaint.
- You have safety concerns, for yourself or others.

## A final note

Being a bystander is not about being perfect. It is about refusing to let silence do the work of permission. You will not get every response right. You will sometimes freeze. You will sometimes choose the wrong moment.

None of that cancels out the times you did step in, check in, or speak up. Culture is built one small decision at a time, and the people who choose to interrupt harm, even imperfectly, are the ones who change workplaces.

*"Silence is not neutral. It sends a message to the person targeted, no one will stand up for you, and a message to the person causing harm, this is acceptable here."*

### About PhoenixRize Consulting

- I'm Adaku Oliver-Nnona, founder of PhoenixRize Consulting.
- I help organisations build workplaces where people are treated fairly, concerns are heard, and leaders are held accountable.
- My work spans culture risk advisory, anti-racism and bystander intervention programmes, inclusive leadership, and organisational culture change.
- To discuss how I can support your organisation, get in touch via phoenixrize.ie.

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