

When it Comes to Bias, We Must Prioritize Impact Over Intent



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A middle school student doodles swastikas in his notebook and shows it to a classmate sitting nearby; later he tells his teacher he didn't know it was a hate symbol.

A staff member at a team meeting makes a sexist "joke," but when a colleague responds that they find it offensive, the person retorts with, "I was only kidding."

A group of white teenagers sing along to a song, loudly vocalizing the N-word in the lyrics; when the incident is reported, the students respond that they "were just singing along" and they weren't "using a slur on purpose."

In each of these examples, there is a disconnect between intent and impact. Those using biased or offensive language excuse their behavior by pointing to being unaware, their ignorance or a lack of "bad" intentions, instead of acknowledging the harmful impact of their offensive words and actions on the people around them.

What's the difference between intent and impact?

Intent is **what we mean** by our words or actions. Impact is how those words or actions are **experienced, felt or understood** by either the person they are directed to, or others.

When it comes to biased language or actions, we often prioritize intent over impact. This means that when harm is caused, we tend to emphasize what we meant by our words or actions—rather than how our words made another person feel or the consequences of our behavior. We might also excuse, or brush under the rug, the offensive words or actions if we perceive them as unintentional. In discussing a biased incident, we might redirect the focus to a person's intentions (i.e., "I didn't mean it like that"), rather than focusing on the feelings of the person who has been harmed. In this way, we center intention rather than the impact on others.

Prioritizing intent happens every day in all aspects of our lives—in the classroom, at work, in public spaces, online and at home.

Why is it important to prioritize impact?

Regardless of intent or whether actions and words were purposeful, the targeted or affected person is still harmed. That's why it is critical to prioritize impact and acknowledge the harm that was caused.

Using the example of the sexist "joke" at the staff meeting, the staff member who told the joke may not have realized it was sexist. Perhaps they wanted to make everyone laugh, or build camaraderie or intimacy. Or maybe the person is a new team member and humor is their usual way to connect with others. But their sexist "joke" caused harm to other members of the team, particularly those who are experiencing sexism in other aspects of the job. The joke made them feel even more excluded and marginalized than they already feel. Instead of saying "I was only kidding," the person who made the comment should have focused on the harm they caused.

Whether intentional or not, offensive and biased words—even jokes—cause harm. That harm or impact can take many forms. It can feel like a direct attack on the identity of a targeted person—on a core part of who they are. It can cause a person to feel they don't belong, that their feelings aren't important, or that they aren't respected or valued. It can cause the targeted person to stop participating in an activity or group. They might even leave a job or start skipping school. The harm can result in making the targeted person feel uncomfortable, scared or threatened because they fear that comments could be precursors to more consequential acts of bias (e.g., discrimination, violence). The harmful and offensive words and actions can also target others who identify in that same way, or other marginalized identity groups who feel their group could be next.

Why can it be difficult to prioritize impact?

A recent example involving singer Lizzo is illustrative. When Lizzo [released a song with an ableist slur in it](#), disability activists brought the hurtful nature of the word to Lizzo's attention. She did not know it was a slur and her lack of knowledge of and sensitivity to ableist language caused her to use it unknowingly and as a result, cause harm.

It's not always easy to prioritize impact over intent. Like Lizzo, we may not be able to anticipate the harm we cause others because we lack the knowledge or understanding of offensive words and language, be they subtle or overt. We may not know or understand the history, experiences and perspectives of the people with whom we are communicating. Not having this background information can cause us to harm them unintentionally. As a society and as individuals, we tend to see things from our own points of view and often lack the ability to see and understand things from others' point of view. That is what we need to change.

Privilege can also be a factor. It is a privilege to not have to be concerned about or consider the impact of our words, especially on marginalized identity groups. For the identity groups for which we hold privilege, we may not see, understand or feel the harm of those in the marginalized group because it doesn't affect us or our group.

How can we prioritize impact?

How do we prevent ourselves from causing harm to begin with? What can we do to avoid negatively impacting another person by our words and actions when we don't mean to?

First, do a gut check. If you feel unsure or uncomfortable about something you plan to say, or if you think your words could be misunderstood or harmful, take time to reconsider what you are about to say or do. Take a pause to self-reflect and ask yourself a few questions that center on the potential impact of your words and actions. It's best to err on the side of caution, especially when you are communicating in public spaces like schools, workplaces and communities that need to be welcoming and inclusive.

Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- Who is the person/community to whom I'm directing these comments? What identity group(s) do they belong to? In what ways could their experience and perspective differ from my own?
- If I have caused harm in the past, what have I learned from that?
- Could these words be misunderstood or cause harm? How so?
- Would I use this language with someone else or a different community?
- Could someone perceive my words or actions as biased, insensitive or offensive? Could my words make this environment less welcoming to some people, even if they are not here now?
- What words could I use instead?
- If I am trying to convey familiarity and closeness by using a joke or other language, what is another way to convey that feeling that won't cause harm?

Even if you actively work to prevent harm, your words or actions may still negatively impact another person, even if it's not on purpose.

When Lizzo was given the feedback about her offensive lyric, she listened, reflected on her actions and then re-released the song without the slur in the lyrics. She explained, "I've had many hurtful words used against me so I understand the power words can have (whether intentionally or in my case, unintentionally)." Lizzo acknowledged—whether intentional or not—she caused harm and then took steps to repair that harm. She prioritized the impact of her words, rather than her intentions.

If you realize the harm in the moment (because the person said something or by observing their body language or facial expression) or learn later you've caused harm, here are some strategies for responding.

1. Resist the urge to say things like, "I didn't mean it like that," "That was a miscommunication," "I was just joking," or "You're reading too much into it."
2. If the person shares with you why it was harmful, listen with the goal to understand and empathize, not defend or explain yourself.
3. Center the person who was harmed—their feelings, experiences, and perspective—not yourself or your intentions.
4. Apologize and acknowledge the impact that your words or actions had on the person.
5. Learn from your mistake, and do better. Depending on your relationship with the targeted person, seek to learn more without putting the responsibility on them to educate you.
6. Take responsibility for your own learning about harmful language by reflecting on those and other harmful words by reading, watching and listening.

Our words are powerful and consequential. Our words can inflict harm. However, our words can also be used to take accountability and make amends when we've caused harm. The more we focus on the impact of our words, the more likely our schools, online spaces, workplaces and communities will be safe, respectful and inclusive for all.