

I DIDN'T MEAN IT LIKE THAT

Challenging Your Own Biases

Anyone, even those who use and choose their words carefully, may find themselves inadvertently using language or making insensitive comments that hurt others. While the intent may be benign or even neutral, the impact of the words may deeply affect the listener enough for him or her to respond. In such situations, it is easy to get defensive and say, “That’s not what I meant” or “You’re taking it the wrong way.” However, recognizing that all people have biases – developed consciously and unconsciously through socialization, education and media exposure - can help to create opportunities for us to “unlearn” biases and to check ourselves for stereotypes or misinformation that we may hold about people with backgrounds different from our own.

1. **Acknowledge your own feelings.**

Note how being accused makes you feel. Accusations of prejudice can bring up a variety of emotions including hurt, frustration, anger, resentment and guilt. Take time to explore and address your feelings before taking action.

2. **Acknowledge the person’s comments and feelings.**

Making sure the person feels heard is the first step to effective communication about the issue at hand: “I understand that you feel my words were prejudiced or unfair, and that concerns me.” Gather information. Ensure that you understand the person’s perception. Whether or not the perception is based on reality, it is important to remember that if it feels real to the person and needs to be addressed. Remember that the effects of prejudice are cumulative. It may be that the person had multiple experiences over time that were perceived as being prejudiced and is reacting to you based upon this cumulative experience.

3. **Assess the situation.**

Based on your observations and conversations, determine the person’s underlying needs. Respond with respect. Understand that even though your behavior may not have been intended as biased, it was perceived as biased. Try to avoid becoming defensive since defensiveness can block communication. Use the conflict as an opportunity to clarify any misunderstandings.

4. **Do not immediately dismiss the accusation.**

Look at the situation and yourself honestly. If it turns out that your behavior was consciously or unconsciously prejudicial or unfair, allow yourself to reflect on the incident. Be willing to acknowledge what happened and modify your behavior accordingly. Remember that all people have biases. Being willing to admit when you are wrong is a powerful strategy to promote a respectful, inclusive environment.