

Belonging: the Path to Speaking Up When You See Bias

Michael Seitchik, Director of Research and Assessment

"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." Edmund Burke

Several years ago, while I was facilitating a strategy retreat for a client, they invited me to attend a dinner that night at the CEO's golf course. The company's senior management and their spouses attended. Before dessert they had a professional comedian come on stage to entertain the gathering. He started out funny enough, but very quickly started telling sexist jokes. There was a mixture of laughter, nervous laughter and feelings of awkwardness. I was sitting next to the CHRO who told me he felt the comedy was in poor taste. He asked me what to do.

I told him to get up on stage, take the mic from the comedian, tell him his material was inappropriate, apologize to the audience, and tell them to enjoy their desserts.

The CHRO said he was worried that if he did that, he would upset everyone and get in trouble with his CEO. I encouraged him to do what he felt was right.

So, he got up on stage and did what I suggested. When the CHRO put down the mic, the audience gave him a standing ovation.



Speaking Up is the Right Thing to Do

Bias in the workplace takes many forms. It may show up as sexism, racism or even bias against another department or function. What they all have in common is that bias makes someone feel less valued, less respected or excluded because of some group they are identified with. While it can take many forms, there always seems to be some type of "in" and "out" groups at work, with the "out" group feeling like they do not belong.

Making sure all people feel like they belong is not just the right thing to do morally, it is the right thing to do business-wise. For example, research finds that "the need to belong trumps the need for safety." (Glaser, 2013). According to research by Stewart et. al., "A sense of belonging and attachment to a group of co-workers is a better motivator for some employees than money." (2012).

In their 2016 Harvard Business Review article entitled *Why Diverse Teams are Smarter*, Rock & Grant found that diverse teams are smarter because "Working with people who are different from you may challenge your brain to overcome its stale ways of thinking and sharpen its performance."

So, making sure everyone is respected is the right thing to do for morale and productivity.

The comedian was clearly used to getting laughs from humor that demeaned women. Many men still use this type of humor in our workplaces, but how often does a man speak up, like the CHRO, and say something? How many people say something when someone of another race, department, or country is the victim of being unfairly stereotyped, ignored or left out of the discussion?

The fact that many people do not speak up can be partially explained by the social phenomena of the Bystander Effect and the Diffusion of Responsibility.

Why People Do Not Speak Up: The Bystander Effect and the Diffusion of Responsibility

The Bystander Effect was first described by researchers after the murder of Kitty Genovese in the 1960's when no one called the police or came to her aide even though dozens of people saw or heard her being stabbed multiple times (her attacker even came back later while she was still alive to stab her more). This phenomenon is explained by research that shows that the greater number of people present, the less likely any one person will go to the aide of the victim.

Related to this effect is the Diffusion of Responsibility concept that states that when a large number of people are present, people assume someone else will take responsibility and act.

The research behind these two social phenomena has been well-documented. For example, when studying reactions to anti-Black racism, anti-Semitism, anti-gay/lesbianism, and sexism, it was found that while 75% of study participants considered taking action, only 40% actually took any action. Other studies have found similar results.



In addition, studies have shown that under most conditions, bystanders will more likely help people they perceive to be similar to themselves. For example, whites will help blacks less than they help other whites. Marketing people will help other marketing people more than people from operations. The list goes on and on.

If people tend to only intervene when the person being discounted or disrespected is from the same racial or gender group, the possibility that someone in the "in" group will speak up is severely limited. People do not risk speaking up when they assume someone else will or if it means speaking up against someone from their same identity group.

Furthermore, your identity group (gender, race, etc.) impacts how you perceive a possible hostile, biased act. Studies have shown that when men and women observe the same sexist acts aimed at women, women tend to perceive them as hostile much more frequently than men do. So, what is felt as bias by a minority group (women,

blacks, gays, lesbians, etc.) may not be perceived as bias by the majority (men, whites, straights, etc.).

As a result, when a woman or someone of color complains about bias, others may not be aware of it or “see” it, thus furthering the bias that the person complaining is playing the victim role, is “too sensitive,” and not being sincere. They are perceived as unfairly playing the race or gender card.

So, if someone from the “out” group speaks up, they are often ignored and members of the “in” group either do not see the bias or fall victim to the Bystander Effect or the Diffusion of Responsibility.

Reducing the Risk of Speaking Up

While speaking up is the right thing to do, it can seem risky. However, research has shown that the risk of speaking up can be minimized if there is a sense of strong group cohesiveness.

“In the low-cohesive groups, larger group size inhibited helping, a finding that replicates the results of previous research (cf. Latane & Nida, 1981). In contrast, in the high-cohesive groups, larger group size facilitated helping, which is a reversal of the often-obtained bystander-intervention effect. Apparently, high cohesiveness not only prevented diffusion of responsibility from occurring but actually increased individual responsibility for help as the number of bystanders increased.” (Rutkowski, Cruder & Romer, 1983)

The same researchers found that people in the low cohesive groups did not act even when the need for help was at a high level. This seems to explain the Bystander Effect. The people in the crowd that watched Kitty Genovese get repeatedly stabbed and did nothing, were just a group of random passersby and people in nearby buildings looking out because of her screams. They were not a cohesive group.

The chances of speaking up, then, are significantly increased when the project team or the business unit has a strong sense of cohesion—when people are committed to each other and the team as a whole.

Increasing the Chances that Speaking Up Will Be Heard

There are two factors that can increase the chance that the person speaking up will be heard.

1. Someone in the “In” Group Speaks Up

As mentioned above, if someone from the “out” group speaks up, they are often ignored. It is important, then, that someone in the majority speak up for the bias act to be truly seen and dealt with. In one review of the literature, the researchers found that “relative to women who confront sexism, men who act as allies are evaluated more positively, while their confrontations are taken as more serious and legitimate efforts to combat sexism.” (Drury and Kaiser, 2014)

In the case of the comedian mentioned above, if a woman executive or spouse had complained about the inappropriate jokes, it may not have been taken as seriously as it was when the male CHRO spoke up.

This is not to say that people in the “out” group should not speak up. They absolutely should. But it may be that the “in” group will only take the issue seriously after a person with whom they identify (part of their group) speaks up. It was critical for Martin Luther King Jr. to speak up, yet it was not until after Lyndon Johnson, a white Southerner, signed the civil rights act that the majority of the country supported what King fought for. Women need to speak up when they see sexism, but the fastest way to influence most men is to have another man speak up.

2. The Team Creates a Safe Place to Speak Up

It is important for teams to create an environment where everyone, whether in the “in” group or the “out” group, feels safe to discuss whether or not they feel accepted for who they are and can bring up issues of feeling excluded or disrespected. There are ways to make sure this happens.

For example, make discussions of belonging an intentional part of team discussions. Periodically have team members complete anonymous, short surveys that include items such as:

- On a scale of 1-10 (with “1” being “never” and “10” standing for “always”) how often is your opinion solicited?
- On a scale of 1-10, how often do you feel your ideas are not discussed or taken as seriously as the ideas of others?
- On a scale of 1-10, how often in the last 3 months have you held back opinions you felt strongly about?
- On a scale of 1-10 how often do you feel you can be your true self at team meetings?

Keep the surveys short and only do them every 3 or 6 months. Ideally, over time as these topics are discussed openly and honestly, people will feel safe enough not to wait for an anonymous survey to bring up sensitive issues.

The important point is to make a safe space for people to speak up if they feel that they are not being included in discussions.

Tapping into the Power of Belonging to Elevate All Team Voices

At Bates, we have developed a systematic approach that helps teams create a safe place to discuss whether or not everyone feels accepted for who they are and can bring up issues of feeling excluded or disrespected. The [Bates LTPI™](#) (the Bates Leadership Team Performance Index) includes a facet on Belonging, which we define in the model as “valuing and respecting differences; fostering an environment where all experience a fullness of membership and affiliation.”

Make a safe space for people to speak up if they feel that they are not being included in discussions.

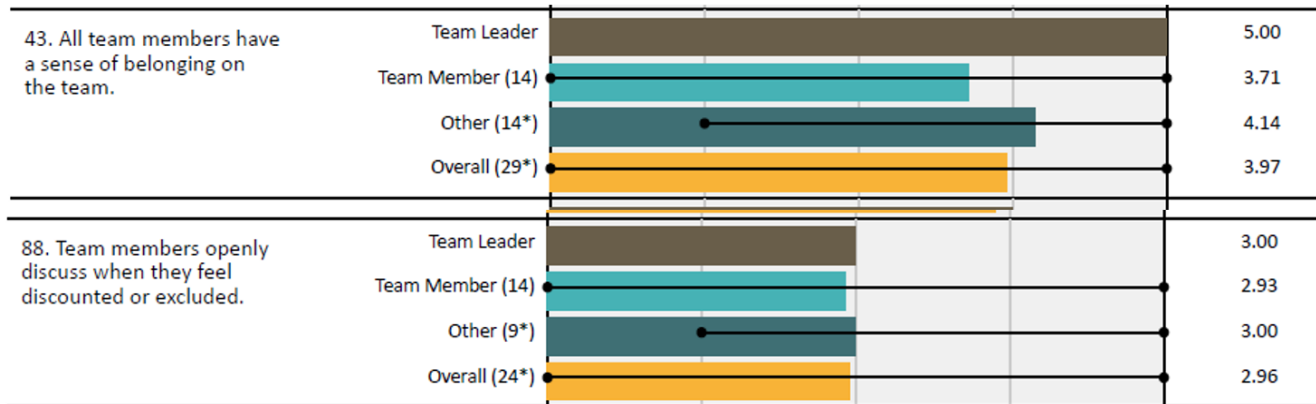
Understanding the behaviors that constitute Belonging and its connection to eliminating bias in discussion and decision making, and elevating all of the voices on the team, can be game changing.

Take for example, a senior team we worked with. They liked each other, and got along well, but they had trouble having debates and making decisions. They were facing a big challenge to implement a new business model and had to up their game so they could get unstuck and deliver on their critical strategic move. Our task was to create clarity about what was holding them back and help them move forward.

Through the LTPI™ we found that they had a great many strengths, but they also had challenges. One telling one was that they weren't great at speaking up with Candor and Courage. And while Belonging was not one of their lowest rated facets overall, when we took a deeper dive into the six items that comprise Belonging, we were interested to find that this data provided insights into their low scores on Candor and Courage which were hindering all from adding their voice to the conversation.

Below are the team’s results of two items in Belonging. The team as a whole was rated by the Team Leader, all 14 members of the team, as well as a number of colleagues on other teams.

Ratings for Belonging



First, look at the first question, which asks if “all team members have a sense of belonging on the team.” The team leader gave it a 5 – she thought everybody felt fully part of the group. The next line down represents what team members thought. The black line that goes from “1” to “5” represents the range of scores among the team members. While their average rating was 3.7, individual team member ratings ran the gamut from 1 (we never exhibit this behavior), all the way up to 5 (we always exhibit this behavior). And if you look at the next question down, you’ll see the team members scores again, in teal. The range on the question of whether “team members openly discuss when they felt discounted or excluded” was also from 1 to 5. That is, within the team, some people feel everyone is included, but may have no idea that some of their teammates feel left out.

When we presented this data to the team, at first there were denials and disbelief, but the specific insights were compelling. And because of the high group cohesion and the fact that it was a safe, facilitated environment in which to discuss the results, eventually the “in” group came around to this conclusion that if some team members felt excluded, we must all respect that, and work on it together. As a result of two days of facilitation, together we were able to create an environment where all people soon were participating in discussions and everyone felt their opinions were respected. After what they learned from the survey data, the team was keenly aware they needed to solicit the views of those who tended to be in the “out” group. They immediately shifted their behavior. Once the issue was out in the open, it couldn’t be put “back into a bottle.” But it took high team cohesion, a safe environment, and the ability of the “in” group to see the data as an objective description of how people feel. It was a way for the voices of those in the “out” group to be heard, and everyone on the team was a better team member for hearing and discussing the issues.

Speaking up can be hard to do, but it is the right thing to do. Having allies, especially allies who are part of the “in” group, makes it much easier to start the conversation. But it is critical to start the conversation and make it safe for everyone to speak up when they see biased behavior.

For more on the important topic of Belonging, replay this [webinar](#).