

What would you do in the face of racist comments in your workplace?

A [study on racism by researchers at the University of British Columbia](#) has shown that when directly faced with racism, people tend to react with indifference.

Participants in the study (120 York University students) were exposed to the following:

They think they are waiting for an experiment to begin. The experimenter walks into the room and introduces two men -- one black, one white -- posing as fellow participants. After the experimenter leaves the room, the black man stands up, says, "Oh, I forgot my cellphone," and gently bumps the white man's knee as he walks out.

The white man either says nothing, or, "Typical, I hate it when black people do that," or, in the "extreme slur" condition, "clumsy nigger."

Other groups didn't actually experience the event, but they read about it or watched it on a video, and then were asked to predict how they would feel, and which man they would choose as a partner for a later anagram task.

Although the study's participants were multi-racial, Black participants were not included because the researchers wanted to see how people who didn't belong to the target group at the heart of the study responded to racial slurs.

As noted by the National Post article describing the study:

- People who didn't experience the racist comments were much more likely to say that they would be upset by the white worker's slurs, and that they wouldn't work with him.
- Students who actually experienced the event were less upset, scoring significantly lower on a "negative emotional distress" scale.
- When no racist slur was made, people didn't differ in their choice of the white (53%) versus black man as their work partners. When a racist comment was made, people showed a slight preference (63%) for the white man.

While I'd like to say the results of the study surprised me, unfortunately, I can't. Racism is still alive and well in Canada and is behavior that, for some reason I just don't understand, is still seen by some people as "acceptable." Situations of overt racism, such as the example noted in the study, are certainly not commonplace as they once were many years ago. But, they do happen. And, subtle racism, in its many forms, persists throughout society.

But, let's step back a minute and think about placing ourselves in the shoes of the study's participants. Let's assume the situation happened at your place of work. What would you do? Would you be indifferent or would you speak up against what your co-worker said? If you were a manager, would you step in and correct the employee for the comment made or just let it lie? Would you be so taken aback that you wouldn't have a clue how to respond?

As a general rule, I think people are conflict averse. From an organizational perspective, that goes equally for employees as it does for the higher-ups. And so, maybe you might not be prepared to respond immediately after you hear comments like the ones heard by the study's participants. And, perhaps even more so if this occurred in a "public" place like the company lunch room. But, what about taking the person aside and expressing your concerns?

But then, what the heck do you say? For many well-meaning people, that's such a kicker that they will simply avoid saying anything at all. **And that's what allows racism to persist and invade our workplaces.**

Scenario-based training and providing employees and managers with scripts to get them through these kinds of situations can help immensely. Get people to effectively memorize the scripted response to a racist comment and equip them with the ability to find the words to react appropriately should they ever be faced with a situation like the one the study's participants found themselves in. Knowledge is power, as they say. If you equip your organization's personnel with the knowledge of how to spot and address racist comments and/or behavior, you can stop racism in its tracks and prevent it from poisoning your workplace.

What steps have you taken in your workplace to nip racist comments or jokes in the bud?

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<http://donnasealeconsulting.typepad.com/workplacehumanrights/2009/01/what-would-you-do-in-the-face-of-blatant-racism.html>