

Five Ways to Tell If a Comment or Action Is Offensive

By Sondra Thiederman, Ph.D.

One of our ongoing responsibilities in the workplace is to treat colleagues and team members with respect. This means, among other things, to resist making comments or doing things that are hurtful or demeaning. On the surface, this seems pretty easy. Few of us would dream of telling a sexist joke or making a racist comment. The problem comes, however, in the gray areas – those jokes and comments that may or may not be inappropriate or hurtful. The purpose of this article is to provide some guidance as to how to draw the distinction between the acceptable and the offensive.

As with many diversity solutions, the answer lies in asking yourself a series of questions, each of which is based on the premise that we fundamentally want to do the right thing:

1. Would I say or do this in front of my life partner, children, or respected friend?

If the answer is no, you have established that you, at some level, know the action is inappropriate and potentially offensive.

2. Would I like it if a group to which I belong were the recipient of a similar action or comment?

3. Have I done or said something like this before and, at the time, did it bother anyone?
4. Am I aware of other ways in which I have manifested what might be a biased attitude toward this group? If so, that bias could easily reveal itself in your comment or action.
5. Would I say or do this if a member of the group in question were within earshot? This final question is the real clincher. If the answer is “No,” “Maybe not,” or even “I’m not sure,” you are most certainly treading on dangerous ground.

Sondra Thiederman is a speaker and author on diversity, bias-reduction, and cross-cultural issues. The material in this article was adapted with permission from her book, *Making Diversity Work: Seven Steps for Defeating Bias in the Workplace* (Chicago: Dearborn Press, 2003).

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