

Workplace tensions: How and when bystanders can make a difference

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In today's climate of global political tensions and polarization, workplaces are filled with conflicting viewpoints. When employees hold political identities and perspectives that do not align with their co-workers, [they perceive greater incivility from them](#), which can result in greater stress and burnout.

Amidst all this, bystander intervention has emerged as a key strategy for handling interpersonal conflicts. A [substantial body of research](#) advocates for [bystander interventions](#) as a means to [support targets and curb aggressive workplace behaviors](#) ranging in severity from rudeness to confrontation, threats and, rarely, violence.

However, the effectiveness of bystander intervention remains largely uncertain. This is where our research comes in. [Our recent paper](#) dives into this crucial topic by constructing a theoretical model outlining how perpetrators respond to bystander intervention during incidents of interpersonal [workplace](#) aggression.

The bystander's dilemma

There are complex emotional dynamics at play when individuals witness workplace aggression. Bystanders often [experience moral anger toward those who they perceive as perpetrators](#) and empathy for those they perceive as targets. These emotions, in turn, drive bystanders to support targets and penalize perpetrators.

However, there are several things that can reduce the likelihood of bystander action. One problem is that bystanders often lack the courage or skills to act on their convictions, failing to get involved in workplace tensions.

Another reason bystanders avoid intervening is fear of backlash from the perpetrator. And this fear is not without merit; [research has found](#) that

perpetrators often retaliate when individuals voice concerns about mistreatment.

Even when bystanders do intervene, their actions can be ineffective, and, in some cases, counterproductive. In our paper, we argue this is because an intervention questions a perpetrator's sense of goodness, causing a [moral identity threat](#) and making them feel like a "bad person."

At the same time, it also threatens the perpetrator's [relational identity](#) by conveying that standard norms for acceptable co-worker behavior have been violated. This suggests that the perpetrator is also acting as a "bad colleague." Threatening messages are likely to be met with resistance from the perpetrator, who is then inclined towards self-protective action.

The perpetrator's perspective

Our paper theorizes that, in most cases, a perpetrator's initial response to an intervention will be defensive and resistant to feedback. This is especially the case when emotions are running high, making it difficult for individuals to consider alternative viewpoints. In such instances, perpetrators are likely to condemn intervening bystanders and may even react to them punitively.

But there is some encouraging news. Specific aspects of the bystander intervention—like who intervenes and how—can help perpetrators see the intervention as an opportunity for growth. For instance, when an intervention offers the perpetrator a chance to feel morally and relationally accepted by the bystander, they are more open to feedback.

In other words, interventions that criticize behavior without attacking the person allow perpetrators to maintain their belief in their moral character and keep seeing themselves as a good colleague. Under these conditions, they are more likely to adopt a [growth-oriented mindset](#). This ability to

save face can lead them to consider the intervention as an opportunity to change their behavior.

The identity of the person intervening also plays a crucial role. People are more willing to accept feedback from those they like and trust. Talking to people in a safe setting and listening to different viewpoints can help perpetrators consider other perspectives.

Power dynamics at work have a considerable impact on intervention effectiveness. Powerful perpetrators tend to be [less concerned about the social implications of their actions](#) and are more likely to become defensive. In contrast, those with less power tend to be more dependent on others and, as a result, are [more attuned to the expectations of their peers](#). To ensure perpetrators are more receptive to an intervention, bystanders with more power than the [perpetrator](#) may need to step in.

Unfortunately, not everyone is equally susceptible to influence from others. While most people want to behave in a morally and socially acceptable manner, a minority of individuals are not concerned by such considerations. It can be hard to convince such individuals to change their mind, unless the bystander has the power to impose change.

Strategies for effective intervention

Our research offers several practical recommendations for effective bystander intervention in the workplace:

1. Carefully consider the best time to intervene. Unless there is a clear risk to the target (and a safe way to meaningfully intervene), it is best to wait until emotions have cooled.
2. Intervene in ways that allow the other person to maintain their sense of being a good person and colleague. Focus on addressing their behavior, not their personal attributes, values or beliefs.

3. Recognize that powerful bystanders and those trusted by the other person are more effective in eliciting constructive responses than those with relatively less power.

Bystanders can play a pivotal role in resolving workplace tensions, with the power to shift the narrative from conflict to resolution. As workplace tensions mirror global and social turmoil, the ability to step in, intervene and shape outcomes becomes ever more valuable, especially for vulnerable populations.

The essence of bystander [intervention](#) is not just about stopping a negative act, but also about fostering an environment where respect, growth and collaboration thrive. Every time a [bystander](#) is able to intervene effectively, we move a step closer to a workplace where everyone feels valued and heard. We should not underestimate [the ripple effect that one thoughtful, constructive action](#) can have.

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