

## Next Steps and Action

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### How to Interrupt Oppressive Behavior

Mary McClintock

- Jokes that made fun of Helen Keller's disabilities were very popular one summer at a camp run by a local social service agency.
- After the first week of the camp season, two girls were sent home. They were the only two black campers in a camp of one hundred white campers. The camp director said that they "weren't adjusting well," and that they wouldn't like it at that camp.

What do these incidents have in common? They're experiences I had during my years as a camper and staff member at a variety of camps. Name-calling, jokes, stereotyping, and discrimination against campers or staff are examples of ways that societal attitudes about particular groups of people are acted out as individual behaviors.

Prior to celebrating diversity, we must first eliminate intolerance. No matter what form it takes or who does it, we must all take action to stop intolerance when it happens. Working toward a celebration of diversity implies working for social justice—the elimination of all forms of social oppression.

Camps reflect the social injustice that is prevalent in North American society. Even though many camps are in idyllic physical settings away from the environmental problems of the cities, the social problems come to camp with the staff and campers. Social injustice takes many forms. It can be injustice based on a person's gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, physical or mental ability, or economic class.

While there are differences among forms of social injustice, there are also a number of commonalities. Some of those commonalities include a power differential between groups of people, the use of stereotyping to limit people, and the exclusion of the disempowered group.

In order to work for social justice in the world, we need to confront all forms of social injustice. What do we do when a camper tells a Helen Keller joke or a camp director excludes a camper based on his race? *First and foremost, it is important to confront the behavior.*

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This chapter focuses on summer camp settings. However, the Action Continuum described within this chapter can be applied to many other contexts.

When I experience oppressive behavior, it is helpful for me to think about having a whole range of possible responses — what I think of as an *action continuum*.

In any situation, one can choose a range of actions—from participating in the oppressive behavior to working to prevent oppressive behavior on an organizational level.

| Works Against Social Justice |             | Works Toward Social Justice |                        |                       |                                    |                             |
|------------------------------|-------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Actively Join in Behavior    | No Response | Educate Oneself             | Interrupt the Behavior | Interrupt and Educate | Support Others' Proactive Response | Initiate Proactive Response |

Now, let's apply the continuum to the incidents described at the beginning of the article.

**Actions That Work against Social Justice**

**Actively Joining in the Oppressive Behavior**

To actively join in oppressive behavior means doing something that supports the oppressive behavior rather than interrupting it.

Examples:

- laughing at the Helen Keller joke and sharing another of your own;
- saying, "I'm glad the director sent those girls home. This camp isn't for black people."

**Having No Response:**

Having no response means not responding to the behavior. Examples:

- not laughing at the joke;
- not saying something in response to the black campers being sent home.

**Actions That Work toward Social Justice**

**Educating Yourself**

To educate yourself means to learn more about what is behind the oppressive behavior. Examples:

- reading about the accomplishments of people with disabilities in the face of discrimination;
- reading about ways camps have been exclusive in the past and now welcome campers from a range of ethnic and racial backgrounds.

**Interrupting the Behavior**

To interrupt the behavior means expressing your disapproval of the behavior. Possible responses:

- "I don't think that joke is funny."
- "I don't think those campers should be sent home."

#### **Interrupt and Educate**

To interrupt and educate means expressing your disapproval of the behavior and explaining what is oppressive about the behavior. Possible responses:

- "I don't think jokes that make fun of someone's disabilities are funny because they assume that someone with a disability is not worthy of respect."
- "I don't think it is appropriate to send the black girls home. People of color have a long history of being unfairly excluded from all-white organizations in this country. We should not perpetuate that exclusion."

#### **Supporting Others' Proactive Responses**

To support the proactive responses of others means supporting the efforts of other people to educate or take action that promotes understanding of differences. Examples:

- encouraging the campers who are telling jokes about Helen Keller to go to the campfire program that includes a puppet show about kids with disabilities;
- supporting the camp board of directors' efforts to investigate ways to welcome campers and staff from various racial and ethnic backgrounds.

#### **Initiating a Proactive Response**

Initiating a proactive response means taking some kind of action that promotes understanding and valuing of cultural differences in camp settings. Examples:

- planning a series of events that focus on understanding and valuing people who have a wide range of abilities;
- organizing a seminar for the camp staff on working with campers from various racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Taking action to stop oppressive behavior can be difficult. It is easy to feel awkward or caught off guard. This action continuum can be used to think about different situations one might encounter. One can then mentally rehearse possible responses to situations that might occur. It also gives an individual the opportunity to choose an action that will be best suited to the situation and to the goal of promoting social justice.

Factors in deciding which response to make include the level of risk for yourself and others, your power in the situation, and your understanding of this form of social injustice. I recommend that you think about situations you have encountered and think about the range of possible responses you could have to each situation. You will then be better prepared the next time someone around you makes an oppressive comment or does something that creates a barrier to celebrating diversity. This action continuum can also be used during staff training as the basis for a discussion on dealing with oppressive behavior.

If everyone makes a commitment to respond appropriately to oppressive behavior, the ground work will be laid for creating settings in which diversity is truly celebrated.

## Working Assumptions and Guidelines for Alliance Building

Ricky Sherover-Marcuse

Since, under present world conditions, everyone either is now, or has been, or will be at some time a *target* of social oppression, and since everyone is now, or has been, or will be in a *non-target group* in relation to some other group's oppression, alliance building is for everyone. Everyone of us needs allies, and everyone of us can take the role of an ally for someone else. The following guidelines are based on this premise. They should be equally applicable from the perspective of the target and the non-target group.

### I. Strategies for Winning Allies

1. Assume that your group and that *you in particular* deserve allies.
2. Assume that your liberation issues are *justifiably* of concern to all people outside your group;
3. Assume that people in other groups are your *natural allies*; assume that all people outside your group *want* to be allies for you and that it is in *their* interest for them to do so.
4. Assume that it is only other people's own oppression and internalized oppression that prevents them (temporarily) from being effective allies to you at all times.
5. Assume that your allies are doing the best they can at the present time, given their own oppression and internalized oppression. Assume that they can and will do better.
6. Assume that you are the expert on your own experience and that you have information which other people need to hear.
7. Speak from your own experience without comparing your oppression to theirs.
8. Assume that your experience is also an experience of victories; be sure to share these as well as the stories of how things are hard.
9. Expect perfection from your allies; expect them to be able to deal with the "difficult issues" in your struggle. Assume that allies make mistakes; be prepared to be disappointed, and *continue to expect the best from them*.

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10. Assume that you have a perfect right to assist your allies to become more effective for you. Assume that you can *choose* to do this at any time. Take full pride in your ability to do this.

### 7 Strategies for Being an Effective Ally

1. Assume that all people in your own group including yourself want to be allies to people in other groups. Assume that *you in particular* are good enough and smart enough to be an effective ally. (This does not mean that you have nothing more to learn—see #6 below.)
2. Assume that you have a perfect right to be concerned with other people's liberation issues, and that it is in your own interest to do so and to be an ally.
3. Assume that all people in the target group want members of your group and *you in particular* as an ally. Assume that they recognize you as such—at least potentially.
4. Assume that any appearances to the contrary (any apparent rejections of you as an ally) are the result of target groups people's experience of oppression and internalized oppression.
5. Assume that people in the target group are already communicating to you in the best way they can at the present time. Assume that they can and will do better. Think about how to assist them in this without making your support dependent upon their "improving" in any way. (Hint: think about what has been helpful for you when you were in the target group position.)
6. Assume that target group people are experts on their own experience, and that you have much to learn from them. Use your own intelligence and your own experience as a target group member to think about what the target group people might find useful.
7. Recognize that as a non-target person you are an expert on the experience of having been conditioned to take the oppressor role. This means that you know the content of the lies which target group people have internalized. Don't let timidity force you into pretended ignorance.
8. Assume that target group people are survivors and that they have a long history of resistance. Become an expert on this history and assist target group people to take full pride in it.
9. Become an expert on all the issues which are of concern to people in the target group, especially the issues which are most closely tied in to their internalized oppression. Assume that making mistakes is part of the learning process of being an ever more effective ally. Be prepared for flare-ups of disappointment and criticism. Acknowledge and apologize for mistakes; learn from them, *but don't retreat*.
10. Recognize that people in the target group can spot "oppressor-role conditioning;" do not bother with trying to "convince" them that this conditioning did not happen to you. Don't attempt to convince target group people that you "are on their side"; just be there.
11. Do not expect "gratitude" from people in the target group; thoughtfully interrupt if it is offered to you. Remember, being an ally is a matter of your choice. It is not an obligation; it is something you get to do;
12. Be a 100% ally; no deals; no strings attached: "I'll oppose your oppression if you oppose mine." Everyone's oppression needs to be opposed unconditionally.