

# **When Your Efforts to Be Inclusive Misfire**

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**Summary.** Sometimes in your efforts to be inclusive and call out injustice, you accidentally cause harm to others. Perhaps you use words that some find offensive, or you neglect to name all of the groups that are suffering the injustice, or you make some other misstep you... [more](#)

As an HR leader and a DEI expert, I know that words matter — especially in high-stakes moments. I also know how hard it is to always get them right. You won't always, but how you respond when you harm others is crucial.

George Floyd was murdered two weeks after I started my new job at VICE Media as chief people officer. As I set out to write an introduction email to a global workforce of more than 2,000 people, many of whom were struggling with the compounding effects of a global pandemic, I labored over each and every word.

This email needed to convey so much in just a few paragraphs. It had to share a little about me, set the tone for my leadership philosophy, create a connection in a virtual world, demonstrate my empathy, and most of all, shake up the assumption that this would be a run-of-the-mill company email filled with platitudes. As an HR executive, my mission has always been to help build workplaces that are truly inclusive and ensure that companies display allyship not just with statements, but with the actions behind them.

After writing and rewriting the email (and getting sign off from my CEO and internal communications team), I hit send and sat anxiously awaiting the replies. Would it be well received? Would my message be clear? Would these new colleagues assume I had empathy and good intentions without my voice attached to the words?

Thankfully, the answers were yes, and since then, I've written many notes about difficult moments faced across the world. I strive to send company-wide communications after disheartening global incidents because hate that goes unchecked can explode into full-fledged violence or worse, good people looking away. But even DEI experts make mistakes, and there have been times when my efforts to model inclusive allyship haven't always delivered my intended impact, and I inadvertently hurt and alienated others.

Last year, I sent a company-wide email denouncing anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, which drew attention from a group of Arab and Palestinian employees in our Middle East offices. A few days after receiving my note, they sent me a beautifully written,

thoughtful response to offer an additional perspective on the content of my email. Specifically, they expressed disappointment about an article I linked to as a resource. They referred to a few points made in the article that may have unintentionally confused readers about anti-Semitism and Islamophobia during a particular time of crisis in Palestine. In my efforts to be inclusive, I had made some employees feel excluded.

There are two distinct ways to react when this happens. You can get defensive and explain the situation away. (“I didn’t write the email without consulting others!” “You’re missing the larger point and getting stuck in the details!”) Or you can take full ownership of what happened, connect with those offended, and use it as a learning experience to try to do better. I bet you know which is the right answer.

I sent an email back admitting my mistake, which is that I had not thoroughly vetted my chosen resource with a broader subset of employees, including important regional voices, especially theirs. I apologized, took responsibility, and committed to do better next time.

We scheduled a meeting to connect and learn from this experience, and they helped me reflect on what I knew and didn’t know about the complex and nuanced cultural matters in the Middle East. I was struck by their willingness to discuss these issues in a collaborative manner. In the end, it brought us closer and it remains one of the biggest lessons for me personally from last year.

I got called out, but they called me in.

For too many, awkward and uncomfortable experiences like this lead to denial, defensiveness, or, worse, staying silent. Studies have shown that fear of punishment and rejection are a key reason why people remain silent. Afraid of saying the wrong thing, employees, including managers, don’t speak up about

racist incidents, gendered microaggressions, or abusive language in the workplace. But that is a huge reason why DEI efforts have remained stalled.

It's essential to welcome difficult conversations and give people the grace and space to stumble over their words. Saying something and showing care is always better than saying nothing.

And when you do find the courage to speak up and then find yourself making a misstep, like I did, here's my advice for taking action and turning it into a positive learning experience.

### **Own it.**

Depending on the situation, whether it's failing to use gender-inclusive language or being criticized for only speaking up when someone white is being impacted, don't try to immediately fix it or explain it away. Live in the tension. Listen and respond to what you hear, and take responsibility for what you said or did — or didn't do. Acknowledge your responsibility, apologize, and commit to doing better. Saying sorry doesn't always eliminate the hurt so you might not be forgiven right away. What matters more is that you show a willingness to open the dialogue and learn from your mistakes.

### **Create a space for dialogue, learning, and humility.**

Demonstrate genuine curiosity in better understanding the nature of your misstep. Ask questions about your word choices, and use this as an opportunity to better understand another culture or point of view. As a manager, you can create a regular dialogue on a variety of DEI topics so you build a climate where there is acceptance and respect for expressing emotions and grace to help one another when they misspeak. Don't shy away from controversial issues. You might host AMAs or lightning talks giving employees the room to share their own experiences and solutions.

### **Model courageous conversations.**

The more practiced and comfortable you become talking about racism, privilege, and oppression, the more others will take notice and follow suit. You can't help someone feel safe about proposing new ideas (or improve team building or anything else) if your organizational culture isn't designed to make sure people know it's safe and beneficial to share who they truly are and what they're grappling with. I write a weekly note to my team where I share personal and professional reflections, and regularly share missteps I've made. This is an opportunity for me to model that it's OK to make mistakes.

### **Call in a friend.**

When I struggle to find the resolve to have courageous conversations or build common ground, I reach out to my community of friends and colleagues — some DEI experts and others from a wide variety of fields — for wisdom and guidance. If you're uncertain about saying or doing the “right” thing, vet your emails or actions with a broad range of voices. You can also try modeling non-leading “what” and “how” questions when speaking with your own teams to get their perspective: “What was your intention when you said that?” “How might the other person interpret your actions?” “Tell me more.”

### **Persist when you make a mistake.**

It's natural to be overwhelmed by a fear of messing up, saying the wrong thing, or not being able to do enough. The key is to fail fast and recover quickly. When you make missteps — and you will — how you react is more important than what you did. When you persist with kind, authentic, and genuine care, you'll better be able to move forward together with a shared understanding.

Most importantly, don't let your fears of making a mistake hold you back. It's true that sometimes by simply acknowledging one troubling event you can bring into focus the ones you didn't acknowledge. It's tempting to stay silent to not offend anyone, but you shouldn't. Of course, I'm constantly considering what to

address and not, and how to bring in as many voices as possible. On some occasions, I send messages after employees reach out expressing concerns. I always consider what is most aligned with our company's mission, values, and behavioral principles.

The path to creating and sustaining an inclusive culture will never be free of obstacles or mistakes. So own them and persist.

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