Bystander training in academic spaces
Agreeing to Disagree

Sandhya P Koushika

Science needs to identify, attract, nurture and retain talented people, be they students, post-docs, faculty or administrators. The next big discovery could come from anyone. This necessitates giving a fair chance to the most diverse group of people such that finally, the best ideas contribute to the benefit of science and society at large. Therefore we must build inclusive environments attracting participation without explicit or implicit bias, with regard to gender, socio-economic status, caste, prior educational training, disability, language or any of a number of subtle cues to a person's background.

Merely assembling a diverse group of people is insufficient. They should be heard and mechanisms should exist to incorporate their ideas to change institutional culture. Civility in discourse is the first step towards creating institutional practices that are centred in mutual respect and open dialogue. Often communities do not sufficiently appreciate the importance of improving existing norms in dialogue to ensure that all members of the community are engaged. Ensuring this is a way of getting everyone to invest in making scientific workplaces more open and equitable. Such practices will go a long way in retaining talent, rather than bleeding it.

To build a culture of openness & mutual respect, people should feel free to express their ideas and debate them. In good environments, these ideas will extend beyond just discussing scientific ideas to include thorny issues, e.g. the #metoo movement in academia.

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The heart of all civil discourse is to be able to express disagreement without denying the positions and perspectives of others. This is particularly important in gender issues but also in other types of inclusivity. The final goal must be for people to be willing and committed to finding solutions (and changing their minds!), even if that might involve compromises from all stakeholders.

Many will agree with the goals expressed above; however, addressing how such changes can be brought about is often a source of debate. Unless we are prepared to confront all aspects of the problem, from everyday conversations to large-scale institutional practices, change will not result. For instance, inappropriate and sometimes offensive statements are made in small groups. Some in the group might extend the benefit of doubt to the person making this statement or simply laugh it off as a joke. Others in this group may view the same statement as inappropriate, and at the very least diminishing collegiality in a working environment. The person/group at the receiving end of such statements as well as those hearing them (bystanders) both hesitate in calling out the individual even in small group settings. A response is frequently stressful and both sides run the risk of being labelled ultra-sensitive or aggressive, decreasing often painstakingly built social capital.

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It is in this space that Institutional policy can set the tone of appropriate discourse. Over time, ensuring that the right tone is set can bring real change on the ground. Institutions do have some procedures for addressing behaviour that is truly egregious, typically through internal complaint mechanisms. Given the overarching goal of attracting and retaining diversity in talent, this alone is not enough.

One approach is bystander sensitization that can benefit both traditionally under-represented groups and their allies, giving people ways to express themselves in groups of all sizes without worrying about how they will be perceived. Sensitization training using role-playing and by working through different perspectives is one means to achieve this end. Such training benefits everyone, particularly the bystander who can learn how to express disagreement or call out inappropriate behaviour in a civil manner, while simultaneously promoting thoughtful dialogue.

The second approach is for institutions to regularly revisit the central barriers that their people face in the workplace. Using anonymous surveys to identify top issues can be useful. One should solicit ideas from the community regarding how to

initiate conversations centred around difficult issues, developing ways of expressing disagreement honestly and building consensus. Well-trained independent external agencies can bring fresh ideas to sensitization and bystander training programs.

Bystander and sensitization training can be an extremely powerful means through which an institution can make a commitment to a more equitable workplace for all its members, thus promoting a culture of working together respectfully. This is not easy to do but it is essential. The role of bystander and sensitization training is one where institutions can bridge the gap between long-term institutional goals and individual ones. Such training allows all its members in a small setting to discuss the issues that they face and contribute directly to altering an institutional environment through an ongoing dialogue. This ensures that the institution does not have a monoculture or one set by diktat only from people at the top, but also values bottom-up participation.

Over time, it has become easier to speak about gender and other types of difficult issues in academic environments. A quarter of a century ago, conversations around gender in Indian science barely existed. Now, such conversations are part of the narrative. In a similar manner, we must educate communities that it is right to not keep silent if confronted with discriminatory or offensive speech or action.

Institutions should encode in their DNA the change that they, and society, want to see. This means gender, socio-economic status, caste, prior educational background, language etc should not impede training opportunities or career paths. This will benefit all: individuals, academic institutions and finally, science itself.