

# WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU SAY THE WRONG THING

Before completing this sheet, watch the video that introduces this topic. You can watch it [here](#). After watching the video, return to this sheet to review what to do when you say the wrong thing and complete the exercise on the following page.

## ...you goofed and said the wrong thing...

It hurt someone. They called you out — or someone else did. In this situation, you, like many individuals, may respond in one of two ways:

- 1 Get defensive, question how offensive it really was, and think the person is just being sensitive.
- 2 Shut down and say nothing.



## Instead, consider this:

Think of saying the wrong thing as a learning opportunity—a time to *lean into* the situation (not away from it).

**We all make mistakes.** Learning how to respond appropriately when we have misspoken or caused harm, whether unintentionally or through lack of knowledge, helps us improve our communication and conflict-resolution skills.

Sharpen your skills and understand that...

# How we handle our mistakes will make or break our relationships

The **Do's** and **Don'ts** of when you say the wrong thing

## DO

- 1 **Become accustomed to making mistakes**—remember, correction is an opportunity for learning.
- 2 **Listen and pause.** If you receive feedback about how your words were perceived, resist the impulse to make the issue about your discomfort or attempt to explain your comments. (Christopherson, 2022).
- 3 **Control your tone and body language.** Be mindful of your facial expressions, reactions, movements, and tone of voice.
- 4 **Acknowledge the mistake,** take accountability, and apologize using “I” statements. If someone provides you with feedback about your statement, begin by thanking them. You can say, “I appreciate you bringing this to my attention,” and “I apologize for what I said. It was hurtful and offensive.”
- 5 **Address how the statement impacted the person.** For example, you can say, “I recognize that claiming I don’t see race or using the term “colorblind” is harmful for several reasons. It invalidates your identity and your experiences. When I use that term, you don’t feel seen, heard, or valued.”
- 6 **Educate yourself** about microaggressions and biases and how to eliminate them.

## DON'T

- 1 **Shift the blame.** Statements like “I’m sorry you feel hurt” and “I’m sorry you took what I said personally” shift the blame from your own words to the recipient’s perception of what you said.
- 2 **Include ifs and buts.** “I’m sorry if you feel offended” or “I’m sorry, but you’re being overly sensitive” magnify rather than reduce the harm caused by your words.
- 3 **Minimize.** Responses such as “It was just a joke” or “You took it the wrong way” shift responsibility for the harm to the recipient rather than your own words.
- 4 **Over-apologize.** When you over-apologize, the recipient has to console you for feeling uncomfortable or embarrassed. Instead, acknowledge what you’ve done, apologize, and move forward.
- 5 **Say it will never happen again.** This is a promise you may not be able to keep. It’s more responsible to say, “I’ll commit to being more considerate in the future.”

Lists adapted from Christopherson, 2022

### References:

Christopherson, E. (2022, September 8). When you say the wrong thing. HonestCulture. <https://www.honestculture.io/blog/when-you-say-the-wrong-thing#:~:text=How%20do%20you%20recover%20when,better%20allyship%20in%20the%20future>.

Crises Prevention Institute. (2022, June 28). CPI’s top 10 de-escalation tips revisited. <https://www.crisisprevention.com/Blog/CPI-s-Top-10-De-Escalation-Tips-Revisited>

# SAYING THE WRONG THING | EXERCISE

Complete this exercise to learn more about what to do when you say the wrong thing.

## 1. Consider this scenario:

At a staff meeting, an associate veterinarian says, “We need to hire more people of color to appear diverse for our clients.” An underrepresented employee is in the meeting and shares their concern with management after the meeting.

**Answer the questions below with your team or individually.**

What is wrong with this statement?

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What could happen if this statement is not addressed?

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Role play a heartfelt apology.

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## 2. Think about the comments listed below. Choose a few and go back and answer the three questions above for each one you chose.

### Stereotyping

- You are pretty good at this, especially for a woman.
- Paternity leave? I thought your wife was home.
- I want diversity just as much as anyone else, but there are not enough qualified Black people.

### Dismissive Phrases

- That’s just your opinion.
- You’re being too sensitive.
- That’s just the way she is.

### Assumptions About Personal Life

- When are you planning to have kids?
- Have you finished all your Christmas shopping?
- You are not married, and you have no kids; you can work this extra shift.

### Microaggressions

- You speak English so well.
- There’s no need to get emotional; we’re trying to have a rational discussion here.
- No one started complaining about the workplace culture until you got here.

### Age-related Bias

- These young people always seem to get worked up over nothing.
- I’ve been doing this for over 40 years. You can’t tell me anything about how to do my job.
- We will need someone younger to handle the social media page.

### Patronizing

- Let’s go over this slowly so that you can keep up.
- Let me explain this to you one more time.
- Wow, you actually did a good job on this.
- Don’t worry about participating on that committee; I don’t want you to get overwhelmed.
- Let me ask someone who knows about this sort of thing.

### Economic Background

- Is this your first job?
- You are so cheap; you never want to eat out.
- This is probably the nicest office you’ve ever worked in.
- Why are you living in an apartment? You make a good salary here.
- Who lives way out there?