

# EARLY CAREER

The Early Career Section offers information and suggestions for graduate students, job seekers, early career academics of all types, and those who mentor them. Angela Gibney serves as the editor of this section. Next month's theme will be jobs in business, industry, and government.



## Dealing with Challenging Issues

### Promoting a Healthy Work Environment

*Sarah Crown Rundell*

As the sexual misconduct allegations continue to surface in our society, many colleges and universities across the country offer training programs to prevent sexual harassment

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and bullying in the workplace. Recently, the *New York Times* published two articles titled “The #MeTooMoment: How to be a Good Bystander” and “Sexual Harassment Training Doesn’t Work. But Some Things Do.” Both articles examine how being an active bystander can promote a healthy work environment. While the articles are focused on the prevention of sexual harassment and bullying in the workplace, I will explain how the ideas of the articles combined with some of my own ideas can help to promote a healthier work environment more generally.

#### Try to Remove the Person from the Situation [NYT Article 1]

According to the *New York Times* article “How to be a (Good) Bystander,” if you see a colleague being harassed by another colleague or one colleague using their power over another colleague, you should try to remove the person being harassed or bullied from the situation by asking to talk with him/her or by asking if he/she would like to grab a coffee with you. I think this could be broadly applicable in the workplace.

Perhaps you witness an exchange between two department members, and you notice that the exchange makes you feel uncomfortable—maybe the exchange doesn’t rise to the level of bullying or harassment, but you wonder if one of the involved parties needs an “out” from the situation. You could provide an opening for the person by asking him/her a question or by asking to talk to him/her about something. For instance, you might say, “I’m giving an exam tomorrow in my Calculus class. Would you mind taking a look at the exam and providing me with your feedback?” Whether or not you actually have a question about your exam, the extra feedback is likely helpful, your request shows that you value the other person’s insights, and you have discreetly provided the person with a possible “out” from a situation where he/she may feel uncomfortable.

#### Follow Up with the Person and See How He/She Is Doing [NYT Article 1]

Coupled with removing the harassed or bullied person from the situation, if you observe an uncomfortable situation between colleagues where one person has been placed in a difficult situation, it can be helpful to follow up with the person who was placed in the difficult situation to see how he/she is doing. If you were able to remove him/her from the situation, you may be able to follow up with him/her immediately. Whether you were able to remove the

person from the situation or not, it's helpful to follow up with the person at a later time to see how they're doing, as people process situations at different speeds. Following up lets the person know you care and provides an opening for them to talk about how they are feeling in light of the situation. All of this being said, especially if the affected person is a senior member of your department and you are a junior faculty member, you may feel uncomfortable following up with him/her, and so if you don't feel comfortable following up, that is okay as well.

### **Talk to the Coworker(s) Who Instigated the Difficult Situation [NYT Article 1]**

It's also important at some point to follow up with the coworker(s) who instigated the situation. Depending on the nature of the situation, you may need to wait until the coworkers and/or you have calmed down, so that the conversation can occur within an atmosphere of respect. If your campus has a mediation program and depending on the issues involved in the situation, you might find it helpful to enlist their help to mediate the conversation. Again, if you are a junior faculty member of your department, and the colleague who instigated the situation is a senior member of the department, you may feel uncomfortable approaching the instigator. Depending on the nature of the incident and whether you feel comfortable talking to the chair of your department, you might consider talking with him/her. Your chair might then be able to follow up with the instigator of the incident as well as the person who was placed into the difficult situation.

### **Encourage an Atmosphere of Respect [NYT Article 2]**

In relationships with coworkers, make an effort to compliment and point out the successes of others within your department and work environment and try to be open to hearing others' ideas and learning from others. This can be done in a formal or informal way. Perhaps at the beginning of department meetings or while gathering near the coffee and copy machines, you might congratulate another member on a recent achievement. I believe it's also helpful to adopt an attitude that everyone in your department has something to offer. At my institution, at one point, we took time during a department meeting for each member to share something that he/she had tried in his/her course to both exchange ideas and provide a space for affirming each other. Less formally, you might say to a colleague, "My Calculus II class seems really well prepared; whatever you did in Calculus I last semester really worked."

You can also affirm your colleagues' research and professional activities. For instance, if you notice a colleague on the program for an upcoming meeting you might say something like, "I saw that you are on the program for the next MAA sectional meeting. You always give great talks! I'm going to try to bring some of my students so that they

can hear your talk." Or, if you notice a colleague has posted a new paper on the arXiv, you might say, "I was looking on the arXiv and noticed that you posted a new paper recently. Congratulations! It's impressive how much research you are able to get done while spending so much time with students." If you are familiar with the research area, you might add a comment about the impact of the new result. In my department, if someone notices an article about someone in our department on the Denison University website or another recent professional achievement, he/she sometimes sends out an email to the department highlighting the achievement. Making positive comments to others "lifts them up," and as you make an effort to be a positive member of your department, people in your department may start affirming one another as well. This potentially could create a strong positive atmosphere in your department where others feel not only respected but also appreciated.

In meetings, both within your department and across campus, encouraging an atmosphere of respect might also include not interrupting others and not attempting to multitask. Going beyond just encouraging an atmosphere of respect, you can help to create an atmosphere where people feel appreciated by pointing out where you do agree with others, potentially even complimenting them if you are able to do so, before adding your comments to the discussion. For instance, if someone says, "We should avoid giving low grades to our majors because it might discourage them from going to grad school," you could respond with something like, "Your point that we don't want to do anything that would discourage our students from going on in math is important. But maybe we could brainstorm about other ways to encourage students to go on in math apart from grades."

### **Spotlight Contributions from People Who Are Being Marginalized [NYT Article 2]**

Perhaps you are in a situation where someone in your workplace is being marginalized. For example, say you are in a meeting where someone has raised an important point that wasn't acknowledged, and then someone else raises the same point and it is acknowledged. You might speak up in the moment and say something like, "I believe Ellie made a similar point a moment ago. Ellie, could you tell us more about your idea?" This allows for the people at the meeting to realize, in a non-confrontational way, that they may have marginalized someone, and perhaps this will help them to not repeat the same behavior in the future.

### **Use Respectful Communication**

If there is a situation in which you are upset and feel frustrated or angry, express your discontent to the relevant parties in terms of your personal feelings: "I felt \_\_\_\_, when you \_\_\_\_." Or, if a coworker raises an idea that you disagree with, it's best to challenge the idea that was raised—not

the person. Both approaches tend to avoid putting the other person on the defensive and instead foster an atmosphere for productive conversation. I believe that it is also important that if you feel significant discontent that you find a way to attempt to resolve the issue. Allowing feelings of discontent to continue without resolution can lead to resentment over time, which undermines the atmosphere in your department. This being said, depending on the circumstances and involved parties, it may not be possible to have an open conversation about the issue, and if this is the case, I believe it's important to acknowledge and manage your feelings of discontent, perhaps by talking to a trusted friend or colleague and taking time for yourself (the next two points in this article).

I believe that it is also important to avoid labels. For instance, rather than calling someone racist, homophobic, etc., you might say, "I'm worried that saying that would make students from underrepresented groups feel uncomfortable. Perhaps you could rephrase what you just said as..." I believe that it's best to give everyone the benefit of the doubt in acknowledging that the members of your department likely chose their position because of a love of mathematics and a desire to share that love with others.

However, life circumstances change, and so there may be periods of time when department members are able to be more engaged and invested in their work than at other points in time. Depending on your relationships with your colleagues and what you know of what is going on in their personal lives, you might foster an atmosphere of support by reaching out to them. For instance, if a department member loses a loved one, your department might send flowers or offer to bring that person a home-cooked meal, or perhaps if a colleague has a baby, you could offer to bring over a meal or pick up groceries. I think it's important to realize that there isn't a time limit on grief, whether that grief is tangible to others (e.g., death of a parent or spouse) or less tangible to others (e.g., stillbirth, infertility, divorce—loss of hopes and dreams), and balancing a career with a young family is challenging. It's important to be compassionate with colleagues, acknowledging that there may be times when others are able to go "above and beyond" and other times when they are "doing the best that they can at the moment."

### Talk to a Trusted Friend or Colleague

If an incident has occurred with your coworkers that leaves you feeling frustrated or unsure of how to proceed, you might find it helpful to talk about the situation with a trusted friend or colleague. Often talking about the situation provides you with a space to be able to unwind and a space to be able to brainstorm next steps. If the incident involves harassment or bullying though, you may be required to report it to your institution.

### Take Some Time

If you are feeling particularly strong feelings in light of a workplace incident, it might be helpful to take some time to process your feelings and "cool off" before proceeding. Often when emotions are running strong, it can be more difficult to have a respectful conversation with someone. If you find that a conversation is becoming particularly heated, you might suggest a brief bathroom/water break to provide a space for people to calm down for a moment.

One final suggestion is to take time to take care of yourself on a regular basis, perhaps by exercising, getting a healthy amount of sleep, meditating, eating well—whatever helps you to feel grounded. If you feel balanced and grounded, then it's easier to be a positive force in your department rather than getting "swept away" by the busyness and daily stresses of work.

### References

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- C. Cain, *Sexual Harassment Training Doesn't Work. But Some Things Do*, The New York Times, December 11, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/11/upshot/sexual-harassment-workplace-prevention-effective.html>



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## Self-Doubt and Imposter Syndrome

*Brian Lehmann*

Failure is part of life as a mathematician. Mathematical research is genuinely hard—progress is accompanied by false starts, dead ends, and months of effort. Teaching can feel unrewarding, and its impact can be hard to assess. Taking into account the uncertainties of the academic career

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