

Heritage University
Heritage Core: Communications 305

The “Ouch” Factor: Managing Offensive Comments

When we communicate across cultures, genders, and differences caused by age, regional experiences, work environments, or any setting with in-groups and out-groups, we need strategies to keep the lines of communication open.

I offer four strategies below and encourage class members to share strategies that have worked for them.

My first idea came from a presentation by Harv Leavitt who worked at Heritage University as a counselor in the Student Support Services Program for many years. This is the “ouch” strategy. If someone says something that offends or hurts your feelings, just say “ouch.” In this class, if someone says ouch, we will stop and process what has happened. Often we do not know that our comments can be taken in more than one way. Another person’s “ouch” is a great opportunity for us to learn together.

My second idea comes from Dr. Peter Frederick, who offers the idea below in an article, “Walking on Eggs: The Dreaded Diversity Discussion.” This strategy works when you are leading a seminar, facilitating a discussion, running a workshop, or teaching a class. If a participant says something that seems rude, or even worse, racist, pause, then repeat the words of the participant as accurately as possible, and wait. Often, the participant will see how the words sounded, and rephrase, apologize, whatever seems appropriate in the circumstances. If not, use a phrase like, “I am sorry you feel that way,” and as firmly and constructively as possible, reaffirm the communications rules of the meeting, discussion, workshop, or class.

Another strategy for responding to rude, demeaning, or racist remarks is to ask the person who made the remark, “Could you tell me why you think that/feel that way?” Or “I am not certain I understand your point. Could you explain?” Listen to the person, don’t interrupt, and then respond.

If a group is angry, not listening to each other, and/or getting out of control, call a time out. Ask everyone to write down how they are “feeling.” “Keep everyone focused on I messages. I am feeling afraid/demeaned, etc.” Then use the “eagle feather” approach. Each person in turn gets to speak without being interrupted. When holding the “eagle feather,” the person speaking must speak honestly from his/her heart. Make certain everyone has a chance to speak, even if all they say is “I pass.” Go around a second time to those who passed. (This strategy was shared with me by one of our Native American counselors, Tangee Hyde, who has now passed way.)