

# You've Just Been Called a Bigot. Now What?

So you have just been accused of being a bigot of some kind—you're a racist, a sexist, a homophobe, a xenophobe, or some other horrible-sounding name. Don't fool yourself. Everyone is a potential target. Anyone can be called out.

Forget intersectionality. African-Americans, women, LGBTQ, Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and all manner of foreign nationals have all been accused of discrimination at one time or another. Being a member of a protected class does not insulate you from these allegations.

Your boss subtly distances himself from you. Your coworkers look at you differently. Will you lose your job? Will you ever work again? Your reputation and career suddenly seem to hang in the balance.

Allow me to suggest a few tools for your response toolkit. After nearly two decades of working in the field of discrimination complaints, I continue to be surprised that these allegations can sometimes cause devastation with very little evidence. We have come to expect that the accused will either prove himself innocent or immediately begin apologizing and offering penance. Take heart and consider these points:

## **Don't panic.**

Accusations like these can overpower even the best response. Spineless bosses, owners fearful of boycotts, and threats of lawsuits can make capitulation seem like the only path forward. But for every member of the outraged mob, there are even more people around you who empathize with the falsely accused. Typically the accusations rapidly lose their power if the accuser is unable to substantiate the charge as he is

pressed to do so. If you can make it through the first 72 hours, you may be home free. Keep your head up and your shoulders back and you just might make it through.

## **Push back.**

A person you might barely know can't suddenly claim to be an authority on your attitudes. An allegation of bigotry is an allegation about your attitudes and preferences. Consider saying something like this: "I'm happy to listen to what Mr. Smith thinks if he's speaking for his own attitudes and beliefs. I'm happy to share my beliefs with Mr. Smith if he wants to listen to me and he has questions. I won't tell Mr. Smith what he likes, what he hates, or what his bigotries are. He's the expert on his own thoughts and emotions and it would not be appropriate for me to just assign him thoughts. By the same token, I would ask that I be given the opportunity to speak for my own thoughts. I am not an expert on his beliefs and he is not an expert on mine."

So often these allegations come from near or total strangers. Would this person have a basis to tell the world what your favorite color is? Your favorite movie? Does the accuser know your attitude on kale or what church you go to? Chances are good that the accuser feels no need to establish a factual basis for the allegation because the pressure always shifts to the accused to prove himself innocent once an allegation is made. If the only thing the accuser knows about you before making the allegation is what the accuser can see then aren't they guilty of exactly what you were just accused of?

## **Think about the accuser's motive.**

If you are being accused of bigotry by a near stranger, chances are that you just prevented the person from getting something he wanted—e.g. a job, a better review, or a contract. It's important to remember the accusation is likely

a means to this end and you shouldn't take it personally. The person doesn't actually know you or have real reason to believe you're a bigot, they just want what you didn't give them.

## **Make it about the widgets.**

When these allegations are made in the work environment, it's almost always a defense to explain that you made your decision was based upon business considerations. Every office, business, or store makes a "widget" that keeps the operation going. Maybe you sell real estate or make pencils. Whatever it is, if you can show that you made the decision best suited to help you make more widgets, then you will be best-positioned to win. Likewise, when you respond to an allegation, don't focus on the characteristics of the accuser. You may have adopted a son of that same race or have a gay brother but mentioning these things is not the best and first response you should make to the allegation. Instead, talk about the widgets and how the decision you made is connected to the business you're in.

## **Provide a short and calm denial.**

Never give a long speech about your cultural credentials. You can't prove yourself tolerant and a rambling and defensive speech has the opposite effect. Just a simple "No, that's not true" should suffice. If you remember that the accusation is not personal, it's easier to keep your cool.

## **Either apologize or don't.**

Apologize for legitimately bad decisions and mistakes. But a half apology or an undeserved *mea culpa* just feeds the beast. It's never sincere enough. It never covers all the right bases. The audience is always too small or too large. The tone

of the apology is never quite right. Just ask [Kevin Hart](#). They never stop demanding you rework and restate the apologies one more time.

Even if you have made a decision based upon faulty information, this doesn't make you a bigot. I prefer to make no statement until the facts are in. Make one statement and get back to work.

Sometimes a calm factual response is all you need for the accuser to move on to easier prey. You're not alone and if you persevere, people will come to your aid.

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