

Calling In vs. Calling Out

This resource distinguishes between calling in and calling out as approaches to addressing harm in the workplace — and provides the 5 Ds bystander intervention framework as a practical tool for DSD staff. It addresses when each approach is appropriate, how to use them effectively, and how to respond well when you are the one being called in or out.

Content

What this is for

This resource distinguishes between calling in and calling out as approaches to addressing harm in the workplace — and provides the 5 Ds bystander intervention framework as a practical tool for DSD staff. It addresses when each approach is appropriate, how to use them effectively, and how to respond well when you are the one being called in or out.

Why this matters in DSD work

DSD staff operate in environments where discriminatory language, microaggressions, implicit bias, and inequitable behavior do occur — in meetings, in case discussions, in supervisory relationships, and in interactions with external partners. Staff who witness harm face a choice about whether and how to respond. This resource provides frameworks for making that choice with intention and effectiveness.

The ability to address harm when you see it — as a bystander, as a peer, or as a leader — is a core DEAI competency. Staff who cannot or will not address harm when they witness it contribute to the culture that permits it.

Core concepts

Calling out: what it is and when it applies

Calling out is a public naming of harmful behavior — a direct statement in the moment, directed at the harm-doer, in the presence of others. Its purpose is to stop harmful behavior immediately and to signal to everyone present that the behavior is unacceptable.

When calling out is appropriate:

- The harm is ongoing and requires immediate interruption — particularly if someone's physical or psychological safety is at risk
- Previous private conversation (calling in) has not produced change
- The harm-doer is not a trusted relationship — calling in requires some degree of trust and rapport
- The public nature of the calling out serves an accountability or community-norm function

How to call out effectively:

- Be brief and direct: "That comment was harmful. We don't use that language here."
- Focus on the behavior, not the person's character
- Don't debate — the purpose of a calling out is to stop the behavior, not to win an argument
- Follow up later privately if the relationship permits

Limitations of calling out:

- Public shame rarely produces lasting behavior change
- It can end conversations that need to continue
- It can harm the person calling out (particularly if they're from a marginalized community and the harm-doer has more organizational power)
- It does not address the underlying beliefs or patterns that produced the behavior

Calling in: what it is and when it applies

Calling in is a private, relational approach to addressing harm — a conversation in which a person who has caused harm is invited to understand the impact of their words or actions and to take responsibility for changing them. It is most effective with trusted community members who have demonstrated willingness to grow.

Calling in was developed by human-rights practitioners as an alternative to public call-out culture — not to excuse harm, but to create conditions in which genuine learning and behavior change are more likely.

When calling in is appropriate:

- The harm-doer is someone with whom you have some relationship and basis for trust
- The harm does not require immediate public interruption
- Your goal is lasting behavior change, not only cessation in the moment
- The person has shown prior willingness to examine their behavior

How to call in effectively:

- Choose a private, calm moment — not in the heat of the original incident
- Name the specific behavior and its impact: "When you said X, the impact was Y. I want to talk with you about it."
- Ask questions that help the person understand their own thinking: "What were you trying to communicate?" "How do you think that landed for [person affected]?"
- Listen genuinely — calling in is a conversation, not a lecture
- Connect to shared values: "I know you care about equity. I want to help you understand how this moment wasn't aligned with that."

The limits of calling in:

- It is labor-intensive, and that labor often falls disproportionately on people from marginalized communities
- It assumes capacity for learning and change that not everyone has
- It is not appropriate when the harm is severe, when the person's power over you creates risk, or when

good-faith change has been refused multiple times

Choosing between calling in and calling out

The choice between calling in and calling out is not binary — it is situational. Factors to consider:

- Who was harmed, and what do they need? The person harmed has the most important perspective on what response is appropriate. If they are present, follow their lead.
- What is the nature of the relationship? Calling in requires relationship; calling out does not.
- What is the severity? More severe harm warrants more direct and potentially more public response.
- What is your own capacity? You are not obligated to address every instance of harm in every moment. Choosing when and how to respond is itself a judgment call.
- What is the power dynamic? Calling out someone who has significant power over you carries real risk. This is a real constraint, not a failure of courage.

The 5 Ds bystander framework

When witnessing harm directed at someone else — harassment, discrimination, microaggression, or more explicit harm — the 5 Ds framework (developed by Hollaback! and widely used in bystander intervention training) provides practical options:

Distract: Interrupt the situation indirectly — change the subject, ask an unrelated question, make a commotion. This disrupts the harm without direct confrontation.

Delegate: Identify someone with more authority, standing, or capacity to intervene — a supervisor, a security person, a colleague with a closer relationship to the harm-doer — and ask them to intervene.

Document: If it is safe to do so and someone else is already helping the person being harmed, document the situation — take notes on what was said and done, when, and who was present. Documentation belongs to the person harmed; share it only with their permission.

Delay: Check in with the person who was harmed after the incident: "I saw what happened. I'm sorry that happened to you. Is there anything I can do?"

Direct: Address the harm-doer directly — calmly, briefly, and focused on the behavior: "That's not okay" or "Please stop."

Key principle: The 5 Ds are not a hierarchy from safest to most courageous. They are a toolkit. You choose based on your assessment of what will be most effective and least harmful in the specific situation. You can combine strategies, and you can adjust as the situation develops.

Responding when you are called in or out

Being called in or out is uncomfortable. Your first response will likely be defensive — this is a normal

human reaction. How you manage that response determines whether you grow from the experience.

When you are called in:

- Pause before responding
- Listen to understand, not to rebut
- Acknowledge the impact — not "I didn't mean to hurt you" but "I hear that what I said was hurtful"
- Reflect afterward: what happened, and what will you do differently?

When you are called out:

- Resist the urge to explain or justify in the moment — focus on stopping the behavior
- Acknowledge the feedback with genuine respect: "Thank you for naming that"
- Process your reaction privately later — with a trusted colleague, in your journal, in supervision

Practical application

Practice the language. Out loud, to yourself or a trusted colleague, practice the phrases: "That comment was harmful." "I want to talk with you privately about what you said." "Is there anything I can do?" Until the language is habitual, the moment will feel too fast.

Assess your own pattern. When you witness harm, what do you typically do — act, hesitate, avoid? What factor most influences your choice? Is that factor aligned with your values?

Build calling-in relationships. Identify one or two trusted colleagues with whom you could have a genuine calling-in conversation — people who would tell you when your behavior has caused harm, and people you could tell the same.

Use the 5 Ds as a pre-commitment. Before you're in a situation where you witness harm, pre-commit to which D you'll try first. Research shows that advance planning increases the likelihood of intervention.

Common challenges

"It's not my job to correct people." In a workplace committed to equity, everyone has some responsibility for the culture. This doesn't mean you must address every instance of harm in every moment — it means developing the habit of thoughtful, occasional intervention.

"I'm afraid of how the person will react." This is a real concern. The 5 Ds framework specifically includes options that don't require direct confrontation. Choose the approach that balances effectiveness with safety.

"The person who caused harm is my supervisor." Power dynamics are real constraints on calling in and calling out. The 5 Ds' Delegate option — identifying someone with standing and authority — is often the most appropriate path when the harm-doer has power over you.

Connection to DSD's six program goals

- Inclusive workforce culture: The degree to which DSD staff address harm when they witness it shapes the inclusivity of DSD's workplace
- Community responsiveness: These skills apply in community and external relationships, not only internally

Connection to other leadership competencies

- Allyship Archetypes (Asset 28): The Upstander archetype is grounded in calling in/out practice
- DEAI Integration Across Leadership (Asset 24): Calling in/out is DEAI in relational practice
- Inclusive Supervision Foundations (Asset 9): Supervisors who call in and out model the culture they're trying to build

Reflective questions

1. Think of a time you witnessed harm in a professional setting and did not address it. What prevented you from acting? What would you do differently?
2. Think of a time you were called in or out. What was your internal reaction? What was your behavioral response? What did you learn?
3. Which of the 5 Ds do you most naturally gravitate toward? Which do you most rarely use? What does that pattern tell you?
4. Who in your professional life would you call in if they caused harm — and why do you trust them enough for that conversation?
5. What is the harm most frequently witnessed in your work environment that is least often addressed? What would it take for it to be addressed?

Sources

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- University of New Mexico Health Sciences. (n.d.). Calling in vs. calling out. https://hsc.unm.edu/medicine/education/leo/_media/quarterly-reports/leo-toolkit_calling-in-vs-calling-out.pdf (https://hsc.unm.edu/medicine/education/leo/_media/quarterly-reports/leo-toolkit_calling-in-vs-calling-out.pdf)
- American Psychological Association. (n.d.). Bystander intervention tip sheet. <https://www.apa.org/pi/health-equity/bystander-intervention> (<https://www.apa.org/pi/health-equity/bystander-intervention>)
- One DSD L01 Massive DEIA Multimedia Resource Library. One DSD People, Equity and Culture Program.
- One DSD L05 Inclusive Leadership Library. One DSD People, Equity and Culture Program.

Always defer to the person in front of you. Leadership is a practice, not a position.

Follow up later privately if the relationship permits

Choose a private, calm moment — not in the heat of the original incident

Name the specific behavior and its impact: "When you said X, the impact was Y. I want to talk with you about it."

Ask questions that help the person understand their own thinking: "What were you trying to communicate?" "How do you think that landed for [person affected]?"

Listen genuinely — calling in is a conversation, not a lecture

Document: If it is safe to do so and someone else is already helping the person being harmed, document the situation — take notes on what was said and done, when, and who was present. Documentation belongs to the person harmed; share it only with their permission.

Listen to understand, not to rebut

For division leadership, use Calling In vs. Calling Out to identify the workplace condition, involve affected staff, test an improvement, and monitor impact; set direction, allocate resources, name accountable owners, and review outcome patterns. Start by follow up later privately if the relationship permits

For community engagement staff, use Calling In vs. Calling Out to identify the workplace condition, involve affected staff, test an improvement, and monitor impact; plan accessible participation, make influence visible, and close the feedback loop with community partners. Start by choose a private, calm moment — not in the heat of the original incident

For facilitators learning leads, use Calling In vs. Calling Out to identify the workplace condition, involve affected staff, test an improvement, and monitor impact; build the guidance into preparation, practice, debrief, access checks, and follow-up. Start by name the specific behavior and its impact: "When you said X, the impact was Y. I want to talk with you about it."

Do not replace official legal, policy, clinical, supervisory, program, or Tribal authority.

Do not infer an individual's identity, preferences, needs, or experience from group-level information.

State uncertainty, use current authoritative sources, and escalate when the decision exceeds the user's role.

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