

Mike Liemohn:

Hello, welcome to Advancing Faculty Excellence, a podcast where we at the U of M ADVANCE program talk about issues facing faculty and what we can do about it. I'm your host Mike Liemohn, a professor at the University of Michigan in the Department of Climate and Space Sciences and Engineering. I'm also an Associate Director of the U of M ADVANCE Program, an office focused on faculty excellence.

Kelsey Arras:

And I'm Kelsey Arras, podcast producer and a Communications and Project Specialist at the ADVANCE Program who oversees the RISE Committee.

Mike Liemohn:

This is our first episode, so here is a little bit about us. The first season of Advancing Faculty Excellence is focused on the climate case studies of the RISE Committee consisting of senior faculty and senior staff from many units spread across campus. RISE equips faculty to make their workplace environment more welcoming and respectful so that all can succeed to their full potential. The U-M RISE Committee has developed a number of climate case studies, which tackle common scenarios that can arise in faculty settings from formal interactions like committee meetings to classrooms, and other informal situations like the hallway and email. Links to these case studies and other resources will be in the show notes. Today we're talking to our colleague, Dr. Christine Simonian Bean, about addressing a sticky situation of interrupting a bad actor. Each case study addresses that particular issue with a specific scenario offering detailed advice about how to tackle it. Today we'll be thinking about this particular thing: How to foster respect and inclusion in your unit when a faculty colleague says something that is off topic disparaging, a microaggression, or aggressively playing devil's advocate. Kelsey, what'd you think about our conversation with Christy?

Kelsey Arras:

I think it was great to hear Dr. Simonian Bean's expertise in talking through the many ways that we can address this problem.

Mike Liemohn:

And how do you feel about interrupting a bad actor?

Kelsey Arras:

I definitely feel more prepared. I think the strategies and the case study and what Christy offered were really great. It can be really awkward to address this issue.

Mike Liemohn:

Oh yeah, I agree. Most faculty are not equipped to interrupt a bad actor. Fortunately for us, the RISE Committee has tackled this exact issue. So everyone, welcome to the show. We hope that you enjoy this first full episode of Advancing Faculty Excellence. Our guest on the show today is Dr. Christine Simonian Bean, who is the Associate Director of the CRLT Theater Program here at the University of Michigan and is a current member of the RISE Committee. So Dr. Simonian Bean, welcome to the show.

Dr. Christine Simonian Bean:

Thank you so much, Mike. I'm so excited to be here. I'm especially excited to be talking about this topic. This is something that comes up a lot in our work with faculty, and I think interrupting bad actors is hard for anybody, honestly. It is a very tough thing to do. It feels transgressive in a lot of settings, but it can feel especially weird. I think in academia. I hear this from faculty a lot. "Well, in my department, if I said something, this would be really hard or this wouldn't go well", or something like that. So I love to talk about this topic and I'm excited to be here.

Mike Liemohn:

Yes, that point is so true. I think it hits exactly on the reason why the U of M RISE committee started this series of climate case studies and faculty get frustrated by a tough situation and don't know how to address it.

Dr. Christine Simonian Bean:

Just from the start, say, it's so common to have these kinds of things come up because it's so common, we can anticipate it. That's one of the things that I like about thinking proactively is like we can know that it's coming. We can have some strategies.

Mike Liemohn:

Yeah so today is interrupting a bad actor, and we have a specific scenario when a faculty colleague says something that is off topic, disparaging a microaggression or aggressively playing devil's advocate to the point of belligerence. So I noticed in the readings list for this case study, there are several focused on microaggressions and micro resistance. Could you please explain those two terms for us?

Dr. Christine Simonian Bean:

Sure. I'm imagining a lot of folks have heard the term microaggressions before. A lot of really good work has come out of Dr. Derald Wing Sue and his colleagues out of Teacher's College and Columbia, and the famous definition, I'll read it out to you, you might've heard it before, but I'll qualify a little bit. The definition from Sue et al is "brief and commonplace, daily, verbal behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slight and insults to the target person or group." So essentially, when it was initially conceived, this was talking about specifically racialized microaggressions. But since then, that term has been used and kind of expanded to a lot of different kinds of social inequities in groups. So we could think about misogynist comments, we could think about transphobic comments or heterosexist comments. A lot of different ways that this stuff can be activated in terms of microaggressions.

Something that comes up a lot when I talk about microaggressions is folks will react really negatively to the micro part. So they'll say "this is having a really big effect on people and it's dismissive to call it micros. What about macroaggressions?", etc. Everyone can have their opinion. I'm not here to change minds, but just to say in this formulation, micro refers to the individual nature of it that it's happening one-to-one. Someone's saying something, someone's reacting, someone's doing something. It's having an impact on another person. That impact could be huge. It could be small. That's really up to the person who's been targeted. So a macroaggression in this context means something systemic, something at the policy levels. So it's not an individual to individual exchange. It's a structure on person exchange. One of the most accessible and short articles from this research group is called "Disarming racial microaggressions: Microintervention strategies for targets White allies and bystanders".

This is a fantastic article because it's really focused on micro interventions. So what are the tactics you can use to disrupt a microaggression when it happens? Now, the second term you mentioned Mike, micro-resistance. This was a newer term for me and I think it's really cool and I think it's different than micro-interventions. There's a great article from Floyd Cheung and colleagues called Proactive Micro Resistance in a Microaggressive world, which is really just giving us another term for this kind of action. So again, I was using the term micro-intervention, what comes from the microaggressions field with Derald Wing Sue, but micro-resistance is really describing a different kind of way to disrupt the status quo. So their definition here is "small scale individual or collaborative efforts that empower targeted folks and their allies to cope with and respond to and/or challenge microaggression".

But micro-resistance suggests a larger kind of more proactive approach as well, whereas micro-interventions is really reacting to there was this thing and we're doing this other thing. So if you're thinking about things that might be in the micro-resistance bucket, you could think about shifts and changes to a physical environment or changing a time schedule, reinforcing a mentoring network, taking part in what they call micro-affirmation. So positive action as well as intervening when something has gone wrong or is a problem. So I really like that term. It's newer to me and I think it's cool.

Mike Liemohn:

Thank you very much for those definitions. They were excellent and a great setup for this particular conversation of interrupting the bad actor when it really is in that individual space of a committee meeting, a one-on-one interaction, and you want to step in and change that situation. The approach of the RISE committee is to examine these sticky issues through the lens of the Eight Levers of Action, which is a concept by Ron Ritchhart. We're going to walk through these and hopefully give you, the listener, lots of good ideas for how you can interrupt a bad actor with suggestions and advice for addressing this both proactively and in the moment. So the specific scenario we just talked about was how to foster respect and inclusion in your unit when a faculty colleague is doing that thing that is off topic or disparaging this microaggression towards another person. And our first lever is environment. Christy, please tell us about this lever.

Dr. Christine Simonian Bean:

Sure. Environment refers to faculty's physical and virtual workspaces. I mean, it refers to other things, but in this case, that's what we mean. So if you're thinking about a physical academic department, you could think of the layout of the office floor plan, where people are positioned, what kind of furniture's in a meeting space, the art on the walls, signs, photos, objects, those kinds of things. And if you're thinking about virtual workspace, I mean, you might have other things that you'd add into this Mike, but I would think about how documents are stored and organized, how we run Zoom meetings, those kinds of things that make up the virtual workspace,

Mike Liemohn:

And how might faculty use this lever to address the situation of the bad actor?

Dr. Christine Simonian Bean:

Okay, remember we were talking about proactive, we're talking about reactive. So in this case, with an environment, we're likely going to want to activate something on the front end. So we're thinking micro-resistance. How can we set up a space that's going to foster respectful exchange? I'm thinking about when I was a graduate student, I was the grad representative to faculty meetings, and I actually think

this is pretty typical. There was a boardroom table in the middle, there was a bunch of chairs around that boardroom, and then there was a second row of chairs around the table chairs. So who would sit at the chairs, not at the table. The graduate student representatives, anyone who came late, people who felt like they weren't really engaged or didn't want to engage in the conversation, or maybe people who don't feel like they're a part of the department.

The way that the space is set up encourages and can foster dynamics that you might not want. That's just one example of a physical space that maybe is not suggesting to everyone that everyone's voice is equal in this space. But if you have a space that you're like, "Hey, we could do something to tweak this, to change this to our physical environment, to suggest that actually, yeah, we're all in the same meeting. We're all having the same experience." I like that idea as an example. What can you do to your physical space? Another idea, you might have food at the meeting or before you get into the meeting or some time for people to mix or linger afterward. When people feel like they belong in their department, they have connections with others, it really makes a big difference in how they show up to their colleagues and their friends in those spaces. Let's not write out environment even if it feels like something that's not necessarily directly related to a bad actor.

Kelsey Arras:

So Christy, I had a question here about environment. A lot of faculty meetings I've noticed have transitioned to hybrid or maybe Zoom meetings. So how might somebody be proactive about a bad actor in a virtual or hybrid situation?

Dr. Christine Simonian Bean:

That's a fantastic point, and I think is going to be helpful in thinking about expectations, which I know we're going to talk about in a minute. Thinking really intentionally on the front end about how you set up a hybrid meeting can really change how a hybrid meeting runs. So we've all been in a meeting where the people online are just sort of left to twist in the wind. They're not checked in on, they might be commenting in the chat, no one's reading the chat. Somebody might notice a hand is up if they're on camera, but there's rarely rules given or somebody who's dedicated to following the flow virtually. So I think it's really great to say, "Hey, for our colleagues who are online, this is how it's going to run. We have a dedicated person in the room, and that could rotate." That could be a different person every time. And certainly if it's all virtual, you're going to want to have a different set of guidelines and rules and expectations for folks. And likely if you're in the kind of group with your colleagues and you're thinking about how your department wants to run that, this is something people have agreed on together. This isn't just the chair deciding that all of these things are going to happen in this way. But I think that's a fabulous point. Thank you for bringing it up.

Kelsey Arras:

Thanks Christy, and I'm excited to see how the different levers can actually pull into each other.

Dr. Christine Simonian Bean:

Yeah, they're meant to work together, and so we're isolating them because it can be a little bit helpful to think about one at a time as we're getting used to and habituating this as a flow, but really they really are very, very much entwined. So thank you for bringing that up.

Mike Liemohn:

Excellent suggestions, and I really like that setting up a dedicated person to pay attention to the virtual participants. That's often hard for the leader in the room.

Dr. Christine Simonian Bean:

For sure. And it signals that the people online are important. You're like someone thought of us.

Mike Liemohn:

We have a dedicated advocate in the room.

Dr. Christine Simonian Bean:

Exactly.

Mike Liemohn:

Our next lever is expectations. What is meant by expectation?

Dr. Christine Simonian Bean:

So expectations are just the belief that something's going to happen, that something can be a good thing or a bad thing or a neutral thing. But I have an expectation when I come into a space that something is going to happen to me, to others. We're going to be met in a certain kind of a way. So the things that we expect are likely going to be different based on the spaces that we inhabit, the bodies that we're in, the experiences that we've had, and Mike, you and I are on a same committee, Kelsey, we're on the same committee together. We might be having different expectations of how we're going to be met in the room because we've had different experiences being met in that room. But there are things that you can do to set expectations around a value set that can help to normalize a positive environment.

Mike Liemohn:

So what might this look like in a faculty setting?

Dr. Christine Simonian Bean:

I love setting expectations, so I'm very excited to have a minute to talk about how important transparency is and we often aren't transparent about these things. We might know that, oh, we have to be transparent around our hiring process, but in terms of how we run a meeting, how we're expected to behave, we fall down a little bit on the job with that in academia, I feel like. Think about you wouldn't go into a meeting with no agenda or you might, but you should have an agenda, so why would you go into a meeting without some kind of expectation for how the behaviors are going to go? For example, if we have guidelines, we've decided on whoever's convening the meeting might remind people of what those guidelines are. We might say something like, "hey, as we know, we've agreed to respect each other's varied expertise and experience, and let's help each other meet that expectation in this room".

So that might give a number of people in the room a different kind of understanding of what to expect. If I'm somebody who's going to hang back, because I think I might be ill-met, I've had problems in the past with different people in the room or in the department, I might be like, I'm going to use you, Mike, but Mike said, we're going to reinforce or enforce this rule, so I might be more likely to speak up. If I'm somebody who talks a lot or overtalks people, I might be like, ah, I should try to not do that today because I've been reminded. It's not going to solve all your problems, but it does help with another

favorite thing of mine, which is if you set expectations, then you can remind people and you can do that even if you're not running the meeting. Kelsey, let's use you as an example. We're already making stuff up. Mike's running the meeting. Kelsey's in the meeting. Mike said, we're going to respect each other's expertise and experience. Kelsey sees me, Christy, micro-aggress, somebody, she can say, "hey, I'm just going to want to remind everybody we said we were going to respect everyone's expertise and experience". Anyone can reactivate that, including Christy, the micro-aggressor. So I'll talk about this a little bit too. We all make mistakes, but when we have clear expectations, we can reactivate those, which I think is really great.

Kelsey Arras:

Absolutely. When I'm thinking about expectations too, I think it really helps add some autonomy for people that maybe have different positions in the room. So I'm as producer for the podcast, but I'm also the project manager in a staff role. That always looks different when I'm in meetings, helping the faculty committees. I always appreciate having expectations. Mike, your position as the co-chair, does that affect how you think about expectations too?

Mike Liemohn:

Absolutely, yes. I love this topic so much. We are often not taught how to lead a meeting or how to interact with others and, "oh, I have this great idea. I need to jump in right now." People can end up dominating a conversation and micro-aggressing against somebody else, even though they didn't know. And so having that expectation list ahead of time allows not only themselves to know, but others to chime in. Our next lever is interactions. So could you please introduce this lever?

Dr. Christine Simonian Bean:

Sure. The relational dynamics between people, that's what interactions are. Our human behavior affects other human beings, and so when we're looking at this scenario with a bad actor, what we're looking at is somebody said something that created an interaction that caused harm, disruption, some kind of problem. So that gives us the chance to do something with that interaction.

Mike Liemohn:

Yeah, so this is really shifting from that proactive environment expectation setting to how do you handle it in the moment.

Dr. Christine Simonian Bean:

Exactly, yes. Yep.

Mike Liemohn:

So what are a couple of examples of interactions that might address that bad actor scenario?

Dr. Christine Simonian Bean:

I love it, and also I'm going to just say I love that we're calling it the bad actor because my background is in theater and I just think of someone micro-aggressing poorly. They're just saying it really badly.

Mike Liemohn:



Oh my goodness. That's awesome.

Dr. Christine Simonian Bean:

I'm going to go back and shout out that Derald Wing Sue article on micro-interventions because it has a huge table of different categories and ways you can kind of respond in a moment. I'm going to give you the Christy steps. One, you got to notice there was a problem, and that sounds really basic, but a lot of people don't. Did somebody say something that was a problem? If you didn't register it as a problem, but you noticed someone else's body language shift, it seems like something was happening in the room. Try and perk up. What happened? Let's look around. Let's see what the issue was. Two, you got to assume some responsibility once you've noticed that there was a problem. That's where those micro-intervention strategies are really useful. I'm just going to give you two examples here in the Derald Wing Sue prolance is making the invisible visible. So in saying like, "hey, someone made a statement that had a huge assumption about a whole category of people, I noticed that that happened". I might say, sorry, Mike, I'm going to use you.

Mike Liemohn:

Absolutely, please keep using me as the example. That's why I'm here.

Dr. Christine Simonian Bean:

"Hey, what you said there made me think about something that you might not have intended. Here's what it was. Was that what you intended? Mike? Do you want to say more about that?" So I've called it out. I've described the problem that maybe was invisible to people in the room. Now we see what the thing was, and I'm giving Mike a chance to respond. So that's a way to do things. Another one, and this is quick, this category is called disarm the microaggressions. So somebody says something and you go, "what?". I clocked it. I want to say something. I'm disarming it either with humor or taking a minute. Let's take some power out of this comment by reacting in some way.

Mike Liemohn:

I love that, and I think this really gets to the five Ds of intervention, the direct, distract, delegate, delay, and documented. You just came up with a sixth, I think, disarm.

Dr. Christine Simonian Bean:

Oh, they're great. I love those. I love any of those because they give you tactics in your head you can draw on. We need those because we're often thrown off, taken aback, unsure what to do so.

Mike Liemohn:

How do you start that intervention, assuming positive intent from the bad actor? I think most people are approaching it with they weren't thinking, and maybe they had some truly bad intention there that they were trying to provoke, but often it's not.

Dr. Christine Simonian Bean:

Normalizing what you do when an issue comes up and someone confronts you about something that you've done normalizing saying, ah, okay, thank you. I'm going to think about that. Or Let me take another crack at that statement. That can be so valuable, but also making it okay for somebody to come

back from that. It's often not somebody who is intentionally being evil on purpose. Sometimes it is, but not always.

Mike Liemohn:

I'd like to take a quick break from the levers and go back to the readings list for this climate case study. There's a book mentioned there by William Ury from Harvard Law School, *Getting Past No: Negotiating in Difficult Situations*. A big point is to get back from immediate reaction and to pause a bit and diffuse any anger and hostility. Often that person is saying no because of some other issue. He advocates that you only get to know the true constraints of the other side and considering the situation from them so that you can really understand their essential need behind the particular negotiation. Think about what power you do have to make that underlying need possible for them, and then hopefully they will say, yes.

Dr. Christine Simonian Bean:

That makes a lot of sense. You have folks who maybe are unintentionally doing something. I also want to say this can be challenging for people to hear if they're like, "but I was the target of a racial microaggression. Why should I be listening to this person?" I think it's totally reasonable for a person who's been harmed in a moment to feel like they're not able to or don't even want to. What was the intent? I'm going to assume this positive thing. I'm not saying those are bad tactics. I'm just saying sometimes they're unavailable for a number of reasons.

Mike Liemohn:

Our next lever is modeling. I'm a space scientist and for modeling, that's taking the physics equations of governing the outer space situation that I'm looking at and converting it into a numerical code.

Dr. Christine Simonian Bean:

Same. No, I'm kidding. Go ahead.

Mike Liemohn:

So that word can mean many things. Christy, tell me about modeling in this context.

Dr. Christine Simonian Bean:

I love that example, Mike, because of course, the thing that pops to mind for me coming from performing arts is modeling and I'm doing voguing actions right now. We don't mean either of those things, right? No, we don't. We mean that we're all models of behavior, whether positive, negative, neutral, because we are observable human beings. So depending on our social or maybe our position in the academy, we might be more and more, or less and less, visible to our communities as models of expected behavior. So I would be thinking about that in terms of my academic department. What are people observing about me that might be setting expectations, that's showing them what we do in this department?

Mike Liemohn:

Yes. I think as faculty, many are role models, even if they don't realize and not only for their students but for their colleagues. People have role models across a wide range. So how might modeling work here?

Dr. Christine Simonian Bean:

So if we're thinking of trying to do pro-social modeling, so not the like, and "I did something bad, so I was a model of a bad thing." Let's think about trying to do something pro-social, intentionally breaking down the steps of responding to something like a bad actor and doing that kind of work in a really intentional way. I'm going to go back to Mike being the micro aggressor and say, "Hey, Mike, I know you're not the only one in the room who thinks that, and I know that that made other people in the room uncomfortable, including me. So what I'm going to do right now is kind of describe what I heard, and then I'm going to take a crack at rephrasing what you said in a way that might be helpful or kind of carry us to the next point in the agenda. Mike, is that okay with you or group?"

Is that okay if I do that?" I'm modeling a response in that way? There's other ways to do this. My favorite way to model actually is if I made a mistake, especially if I'm convening in meeting or I'm in some kind of position of power. If I saw that I said the thing that was problematic, I'm going to want to immediately say, "What I said was a problem. Here's why I would like to take a crack restating that. Here's what I would say now." What that does is it breaks down the hierarchy a little bit. It makes it okay to make mistakes, and I'm modeling a way to receive negative feedback, and if somebody calls you out, even better. I can take a moment and I can model how to receive that feedback, how to address that microaggression that I made.

Mike Liemohn:

Yeah, that's an interesting way to put modeling is if you were the bad actor, showing how you can address that and apologize for the situation and reset the conversation.

Dr. Christine Simonian Bean:

A hundred percent. None of these are separate categories of people. I have been microaggressed, I've been the micro aggressor, and I've watched people be microaggressed. We have likely been in one of those positions at least once.

Mike Liemohn:

Absolutely, I agree.

Dr. Christine Simonian Bean:

Why don't we have practice doing the harm repair? So it's important to me. I like to talk about it.

Mike Liemohn:

Yeah and I think that's a good way as the modeling is not just behavior, but also words that you choose. Our next lever is opportunities. How is a bad actor an opportunity?

Dr. Christine Simonian Bean:

I think when something bad happens, you have a chance to do something else with it. But what I actually want to talk about is the proactive kind of micro-resistance. You can do say to yourself or the

group, "we have a retreat coming up". That's an opportunity to leverage what came up here in a larger, more systemic way. We want to think more about running effective meetings or how to diffuse a moment of harm that we can have a workshop, we can take time out of our next department meeting. All of these are ways to think about other opportunities that we have to address these issues too, so it's not just isolated in time.

Mike Liemohn:

I think that's a really big point. The later on point, those are elements. If you don't feel comfortable in the moment, if you feel like there's a power dynamic that is not in your favor for interacting right then and there, you could use this as an opportunity for a later conversation about that and perhaps to formulate a way for you to then proactively set the expectation or change the environment. The next lever is the only one that gets more than one word. It is routines and structures. Help me out, Christy.

Dr. Christine Simonian Bean:

So routines and structures are related. Routines tend to be the way a group does things, but no one's spelling them out, and structures are usually codified versions of this. I like to help people think about how to make routines more transparent, because there's a lot of folks where routines maybe don't feel transparent to them, or it feels like everyone knows what's going on except them. But you're always going to have things that are routine versus things that are like, "Oh, this is the structure. This is how this meeting is run. This is how we do things."

Mike Liemohn:

Thank you. That makes so much more sense. And what kind of specific actions might be taken that fall into this category of routines and structure?

Dr. Christine Simonian Bean:

So I'm thinking about what are structures that might already exist in the department that can be activated? You like to have positive structures because then you can activate them when something happens. Let's say in this moment, something has erupted in the faculty meeting and the chair has regular office hours, the chair can reactivate those and say at the end of the meeting, "Remember, my office hours are Friday, welcome to come and talk to me about this." There's a lot of other structures that might exist too. So I know some departments have anonymous forms people can contribute to around climate incidents, or some folks have climate committees focused on the human aspect of it. Sometimes it can feel hard for people to take something directly to a leader.

Mike Liemohn:

Oh, I see. Yeah.

Dr. Christine Simonian Bean:

But there's also structures at the university. There's the faculty ombuds, there's the ADVANCE office. You can activate those structures as well.

Mike Liemohn:

Great. And with that, we've made it through the levers spanning the gamut of our in the moment interruptions as well as ways to proactively create modifications to the policies and practices in the faculty community. Thanks so much, Christy, for your time to talk to us and walk us through the many ways in which we can mitigate the negative influence of a colleague that either intentionally or unintentionally is derailing a conversation.

Dr. Christine Simonian Bean:

That happens all the time. Remember, we do it too, but that doesn't mean we normalize it. We let it go. There's lots of stuff we can do to address these moments and really help us get to a place where we have a healthy community. We're in a place where we're fostering interactions that we want to see and we're actively going in that direction even when we misstep. Let's make that happen.

Mike Liemohn:

This has been an episode of the Advancing Faculty Excellence podcast, a product of U of M's ADVANCE program. The views expressed in this episode are those of the guests and hosts and do not reflect official positions of the University of Michigan. I'm Mike Liemohn, the host of this episode. This podcast was produced and edited by Kelsey Arras of U of M ADVANCE. Please join me extending to her a huge thank you. This podcast would not exist without her. We want to give a special thanks to our musical crew composition by WP Norton and performed by So Say We All! with WP Norton on lead guitar and University of Michigan, professors Alaina Lemon on rhythm guitar, and Denise Sekaquaptewa on bass guitar. We also thank the Shapiro Library Design Lab team for production support, including usage of their sound studios. Please rate review and subscribe to this podcast. Thank you all for listening.