

Intent and Impact: A Tool for Recognizing Impact

When we do or say something, there is always an impact. Many times, we assume the behavior has the intended consequence, e.g., we expect the result. Sometimes, however, there is an unintended consequence.

When it is negative, for example, someone was hurt or offended by our action, we may respond to that person based on our intention, e.g., “I didn’t mean it” or “I didn’t intend for this to happen.” It is natural. This might make us feel better because we have communicated our intent, but it usually does nothing for the recipient of our action who felt its impact.

Rather than focusing on our intent, if we focus on the action and acknowledge the “negative” impact on the person, saying, for example, “I know this bothered you and I won’t do it again” or “I apologize for doing this,” we take responsibility for the action and deal directly with the issue.

In as diverse an academic environment as the University of California, we cannot assume to know everything about what is appropriate for every culture. If we keep in mind that “we do not know what we do not know” and that sometimes our actions may inadvertently cause people pain, we can acknowledge that pain and take the opportunity to learn from our experiences.

