

MORAL
COURAGE
TO STAND
UP TO



PHOTO CHARLOTTE SCHREIBER

RACISM
AND

DISCRIMINATION

**Intervention against
iniquitous treatment is a
matter fully supported by the
Volkswagen Group. Nadine
Wiese, a social education
specialist from the ikm e.V.
(Institute of Constructive
Conflict Resolution and
Mediation) in Hamburg,
recently led a training session
at the Autostadt on having
the moral courage to stand up
to racism and discrimination.
She explains here what it
was about.**

“And then my colleague says to me and the other trainee, Christian: ‘This tool is real quality. You can see that, can’t you! Made in Germany. Just like the two of us.’ Then he pointed with a laugh at himself and the other trainee,” recounts Omar.

“My supervisor said to me that I shouldn’t look after one of our customers, Mrs Müller, any more, as she didn’t feel comfortable dealing with black guys. From now on he’s only sending Florian,” reports David.

These are statements from trainees at a moral courage training session run for the Autostadt in Wolfsburg. Experiences of discrimination that “rob” them of motivation during their training are collected at the workshop. The trainees give accounts of iniquitous experiences at their company. What they mention are mainly would-be jokes and things that people are apparently still allowed to say.

Racism and discrimination express themselves not only in extreme, direct verbal or physical attacks, but frequently also happen more subtly or even inadvertently.

One person acts intentionally or unintentionally in a discriminatory manner. Another feels discriminated against and not able personally to take any action. Moral courage means having the bravery to stand up for someone else in an iniquitous or emergency situation. Amongst the general public there is frequently a lack of such intervention from onlookers.

Most people know that they are responsible for their actions. However, we are all also responsible if we take no action. What stops bystanders from actively intervening on behalf of others, from showing moral courage when somebody is being discriminated against?

1. The situation in question is sometimes not recognised as racism or discrimination. That occurs above all in the case of long-established idioms and sayings or jokes. There is frequently a lack of awareness or acceptance here that they offend the other person or are discriminatory.

2. Every individual onlooker recognises discrimination, but does not intervene because nobody else intervenes. In the profession

this remaining silent as a crowd is called “pluralistic ignorance” – failing to act, you see, is infectious, the threshold inhibiting an individual from being the first appears too high.

3. Fear or a lack of willingness to accept downsides from intervening out of moral courage, fear of negative consequences from acquaintances, customers or superiors.

4. Not knowing or being unsure how useful it can even be to intervene.

In emergency situations emotions frequently run high: fear or shame inhibit people from taking action and need to be overcome. If that can be managed, then one thing is needed: the skill to act correctly! How should I as an onlooker react in an emergency situation and what can I do? First the bad news: there is no one off-the-shelf solution! But the good news is: showing moral courage is something you can learn. In training sessions everyone can be made aware of how to recognise other people’s emergency situations as such in the first place, can learn how to overcome psychological barriers and anxieties and above all can practice strategies for how to act. A person’s individual repertoire of potential actions thus becomes broader. While that is no guarantee for perfect intervention, it certainly makes it a lot easier.

If you are asking yourself: “What should I do if I’ve not yet had any training on how to show moral courage?”

- Stand up for the person being discriminated against.
- Point out any iniquitous situations.
- Look for allies who share your view.
- Set an example in respect of values such as justice, solidarity and peace.

Omar said: “One sentence from Christian would have been enough to make me feel better.”

David said: “One sentence from my boss would have been enough to let me know he was on my side.”

With this in mind, let us all intervene wherever racism or discrimination occurs!