

Announcer:

In this episode of Tim Talk, a discussion with Dr. Robert Schlager about how to be an ally.

Tim Dentry:

Thank you for joining us for Tim Talk. I'm Tim Dentry, president and CEO of Northern Light Health. Through this podcast, we hope to break down barriers, embrace diversity and focus on issues of social and medical justice. Our goal is to create a collective understanding of the issues that exist and find a better path forward together. I am joined now by Dr. Bob Schlager, the senior physician executive at Northern Light Seabrook Valley Hospital. Thank you for joining me here today, Dr. Schlager. And as we have been friends for a few years, I hope I can call you Bob, and please feel welcome to call me Tim.

Dr. Robert Schlager:

I'm very glad to be here also, Tim.

Tim Dentry:

Thank you. And Bob, I know you have some questions for me, so let's start there.

Dr. Robert Schlager:

Sure. Just as a preliminary comment, so that you know where I'm coming from, I think it's important for me, as a white male and a physician for over 40 years, to go on a personal journey to understand and reflect upon the thoughts and actions as a privileged person, upon my thoughts and actions as a privileged white male. I've escaped almost all of the indignities and inequities that have been experienced by many others in our society. So my first question to you, Tim, is what do you recommend is an appropriate response or course of action by a white male when presented with a colleague or even patient who makes a racially insensitive statement in your presence?

Tim Dentry:

Yes, and thank you for that question. First, I want any person, not just a white male, to know that there's a corporate culture, a culture of Northern Light that stands for a just racial, social and medical environment, and that we also stand united against language and actions which show insensitivity or worse. In other words, it's not just okay to respond, but it's expected and it's supported.

Tim Dentry:

Second, that kind of situation you describe, I see as a great teaching moment. Things that I've heard so far, and this has been such a wonderful journey thus far with the Zoom rooms that we've had and the other podcasts and emails that I've received and hallway conversations and the like, that, you know what, in most people, it's really a learning opportunity, is a teaching opportunity. As you said, it's the journey that you have placed yourself on. You have accepted that personal responsibility.

Tim Dentry:

Some people have not necessarily crossed that bridge into accepting that's their personal responsibility to expand their understanding. So therefore, those kinds of situations you describe, let's embrace those as teaching opportunities. And it doesn't have to be a face-losing situation. It can be a pull someone aside and explain how it made people feel, as Maya Angelou's famous comment brings to the forefront. So bring awareness.

Tim Dentry:

I love one of our international nurses that has joined us. He was on the Zoom room with me, and he described a situation where this exactly happened. In fact, the patient, and this is a great nurse, a man of color, and the patient and their family wanted another nurse only because of this nurse's color. And it was described as the manager was very well-intentioned, wanted to be part of helping their colleagues of color, however, made sure there was a way that someone else could take care of that patient, and they thought they were helping and protecting this nurse. So this gentleman said that was overprotective, and I didn't need that overprotection, and overprotection doesn't help us solve the issue. So that's why I would circle back to, I want any person to know that our system backs them up and that's not acceptable.

Dr. Robert Schlager:

I think that's absolutely correct.

Tim Dentry:

So, Bob, as we prepared our thoughts together, you and I, when we had our... First of all, as I said, we've known each other for a while. I think we have a good appreciation for each other's values and where we come from. The theme of how to be an ally was something that was reinforced. And this is something that came from some of the other individuals that are helping us compose our thoughts in these podcasts.

Tim Dentry:

So along those lines, do you believe, do people change the way they behave in front of you as a physician and you as a white male and as a white male of some standing, as you say, and with wisdom and experience? Does having the physician role make it harder or easier for people to be more racially insensitive in your presence?

Dr. Robert Schlager:

That's a real intriguing question, Tim, and I'm not sure I have a good or a definite answer to that question. I've been a physician for over 40 years. And so being a physician is actually part of my identity and hard to separate from who I am as a person. And I was very happy to hear your response to the first question, because if confronted, as a physician leader, I feel it's my obligate to address the issue as it's happening.

Dr. Robert Schlager:

This reminds me actually of an event following 9/11. I was a physician at that time, right outside Washington, DC in a very diverse setting. In fact, we have a mosque right opposite our hospital. And following 9/11, many members of our community voiced hatred and bigotry towards anyone from the Middle East. I felt obliged to write a letter to the editor of our local newspaper, expressing my support for my hospital colleagues, some of whom I had known for over 20 years. And by doing that act, I actually developed a lifelong bond with many of those colleagues. And it really sort of was the beginning of my journey down this road of wanting to learn more about social justice.

Dr. Robert Schlager:

Along those lines and as a follow-up question, Tim, as you know, Maine is the least diverse state in the United States. What do you think Northern Light Health employees can do to make our colleagues, invisible minorities, feel comfortable and valued here while they're in Maine?

Tim Dentry:

Yeah. I'll start with a reflection on the fact that I believe the way I'm about to answer your question and the way I would've answered it, say, three months ago, three years ago, is very, very different based on what I've already learned and understood directly from people, not only reading some very good books. And we are putting together a great book list, and we'll have those books available to staff that want to invest their time into changing the way they look at things and people. But really, directly from the individuals that are right in our Northern Light families. So I'm so thankful for that.

Tim Dentry:

Here are some of the things that I've learned already. Show cultural humility. I just love that term and that I don't think I knew that term. Maybe I put those words together in the same sentence, cultural humility, but probably not right next to each other. And I really understand that a little bit better. I consider myself a very humble person. And I never really looked at the aspect of one's personal humility, and I see it as a strength by the way. And I learned that from my international experience, by the way, in Arabic Muslim countries and in African countries, one country, Ethiopia.

Tim Dentry:

But to show cultural humility and to take time to learn about their cultures. This is something I heard several times already with people in our family here at Northern Light. Just to that point, take the time to learn about their cultures. And some stated that adopt a natural curiosity and I think that's something that my family - parents, brothers and sisters - instilled in me. So we're probably taught that from a very early age, and it can make this effort fun and not gut-wrenching. Have a natural curiosity for others. What is their background? What are their values? What are their fun traditions?

Tim Dentry:

And also, many say that... And I found this to be really, really deep thought. They're used to being not seen, meaning people walking right by them or just really not... Or things that they say not being heard or listened, even then someone says almost identical words and they're listened to. People are used to being not seen. Help them be seen. So to answer your question, that's one thing we can do. Help others be seen. Make sure that we are really reinforcing and training inclusion of people.

Tim Dentry:

And the last two things I would say, number one is take a stand. Again, it is so easy to look the other way. It's so easy to say, "Oh yeah, that's a terrible thing," and then you go about your business. So take a stand. And I probably learned that, that was my first lesson learned with my very first reflection that we send out on this topic. 99% of the people said, "Wow, I'm really glad we're starting to talk about this. There's so much to talk about. There are all these examples," et cetera. And someone else said, "Oh yeah? So take a stand on what we're against. What aren't we going to tolerate?" And I think that's really great. So it's all along the lines of uniting people. So we can do this without this being a combative, polarizing issue. We can make sure that we are using this to unite all of us.

Dr. Robert Schlager:

I think it's important, too, not to make assumptions in that, many times, we'll make assumptions about people based upon how they look, how they dress, how they act. And that's one of the things that I've found, especially recently, that many times our assumptions are not correct. And you're absolutely right.

Tim Dentry:

Yeah, very true. So you wrote a very personal reflection on your thoughts on being an ally and what to do in general at this time. And when you sent a copy of that to me, I just thought that was so great, so profound, and we want your voice to be part of this effort, this movement, this initiative, this commitment, this critical part of taking our Northern Light culture to where we want it to be. What do you think you can do personally to make a difference in the long term?

Dr. Robert Schlager:

Sure. The first thing is listen. You've talked about that also, Tim. It's so important to listen to others and, again, like I had just said, not to make assumptions, but to hear who they are, where they come from, what their perspective is, and then to try to realize or to recognize where that perspective needs to go.

Dr. Robert Schlager:

I think to read and educate myself. You had mentioned about getting some resources. I actually brought a book with me today that it is really profound. It's How to Be an Antiracist by Ibram X. Kendi. He's a professor of history at American University in Washington, DC. And he's actually started the concept of antiracism.

Dr. Robert Schlager:

One of the very first things that I've learned, for example, is that it's not good enough to be a non-racist. What does that mean? Either you're a racist or you're antiracist. To be a non-racist is taking a neutral position. And I don't know how any of us can take a neutral position. To be an antiracist means that we recognize and actively support policies and actions that make all races equal. There's no race better than another. And in fact, we're all individuals. So each of us, how can we say a black person or a white person when we're individuals? So looking at all races as being equal.

Dr. Robert Schlager:

I think promoting discussions with our colleagues, and I certainly realize the sensitivity. And that makes me wonder, do they need to be led by experts, so to speak? But it's so important, again, to better understand others and to really look at the long history of racism that really, in the United States, is just about 400 years. This is 400 years since the Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock this year. I know my white history very well.

Dr. Robert Schlager:

And I think the last point that I would make is learning the history of minorities, of those of color, of religion, of sexuality and of socioeconomic status are all extremely important. So all of these things are things that I'm personally going to do and that I would encourage many of my colleagues to consider doing also.

Tim Dentry:

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What a very excellent answer, Bob. Thank you so much. I really appreciate that, and I know that the listeners will really appreciate that, too, and take note and hold it to heart.

Dr. Robert Schlager:

Well, it'll be a long journey for me, but I know ultimately that it's going to make me a better human being. So thank you, Tim. I really enjoyed our discussion today.

Tim Dentry:

Excellent. Excellent. Me too, my friend. So thank you very much for your thoughts. And that will wrap up this episode of Tim Talk. Bob, thank you for joining me here to continue the conversation. And thank you to you, our podcast listeners as well. Until next time, I'm Tim Dentry, encouraging you to listen and act to promote our culture of caring for one another, diversity and inclusion. Thank you.

Announcer:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Tim Talk. If you enjoyed this podcast and would like to learn more about the subject, you can find additional information at northernlighthealth.org/podcast. We welcome you to join us for a new episode of Tim Talk every two weeks.