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Watch Yourself

We sat across the table from our user, Deborah, in her sparsely decorated office, watching eagerly as she sorted the index cards with dozens of ideas for improving the experiences of refugee and immigrant volunteers like her. She was thoughtful and intentional about every category she created. Occasionally she would cut into the silence with a comment such as "Oh, we did something like this a bit ago". Even with prompting, she didn't want to do much narration while categorizing so that she could concentrate on her own thoughts. This didn't give us a lot of feedback other than acknowledging that many of our ideas were reasonable but had been implemented in some form already. Then it came time to bring out the physical models. Even before presenting Deborah with our basic foam devices, I began apologizing for the idea. The "voice activated bias checker watch" (header image, above), as we called it, would detect when a volunteer said something indicating privilege or bias. It would then, as I explained to Deborah, flash a small LED light red to notify the volunteer that they had said something problematic. As I was talking, I watched her face for any signs of offense or disgust. It seemed hypocritical to be in our position as students, telling her what was and was not biased; we weren't the ones who had put in the time and energy to work with these refugees for so many years. Surprisingly she didn't act defensively or seem offended at all. Instead she provided practical feedback, saying "I would be worried about having volunteers use something like this because they're already nervous about saying something inconsiderate to the refugees they're working with". We all relaxed, glad that we hadn't offended her, but instead had learned something important about our user group. What they need is help and guidance, not a reprimanding for their actions.

The feedback we gained from what we thought was going to be an embarrassing co-design ended up being instrumental in shaping our ideas moving forward. Yet, we had almost not brought the 'Bias Watch' for fear of how it would reflect on us. We were afraid that bringing a flashy device would look as if we were approaching a nuanced, sensitive issue, with a

clunky, gimmicky solution. However, in trying to show that we were understanding of others, we ended up closing ourselves off from further insights. From this comes a greater lesson: Don't allow your personal reservations to prevent ideas with potential from ever seeing the light of day (or in this case, the light of a co-design). Filtering out interesting ideas because of what they might say about ourselves skews ideas towards what is safe and predictable.

It may seem fairly surface level to acknowledge that we filter our own ideas through ourselves, however the actual act of putting your personal worries aside in favor of critical feedback requires a more complex understanding of where these reservations are coming from. If an idea is identified as "bad" in the process of sifting through ideas, stop to think about where this label is coming from. Is this idea "bad" because it doesn't incorporate insights from user interviews or because it doesn't fit into our typical idea of what a solution should look like? Don't allow yourselves to make snap judgements without questioning the foundation of such decisions. That being said, answering these questions could also provide further evidence for why the idea should be modified. For example, some personal reservations may give good indications of ideas being legitimately problematic. Ideas that make major assumptions or broach sensitive/controversial subjects may create a less trusting atmosphere in a co-design session. Doing so could compromise the rest of the session if a user becomes unhappy and sets up barriers that prevent them from giving more honest feedback.

In order to get the most out of co-designs it's important to bring in a range of ideas from practical and realistic (the "grass") to unexpected and bold (the "sky"). Doing so means putting your personal reservations aside in favor of valuable feedback. Take note of what makes you decide an idea isn't good enough to be presented to a user, and make sure it isn't because of how it reflects back on you. In short, watch yourself.