

Recognizing and Responding to Microaggressions at Work

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May 10, 2022



Illustration by Aaron Marin

Summary. Microaggressions, the insensitive statements, questions, or assumptions aimed at traditionally marginalized identity groups can happen to anyone, of any background, at any professional level. The research is clear about the impact seemingly innocuous... [more](#)

We've all been in situations at work when someone says or does something that feels hostile or offensive to some aspect of our identity — and the person doesn't even realize it. These kinds of actions — insensitive statements, questions, or assumptions —

are called “microaggressions,” and they can target many aspects of who we are. For example, they could be related to someone’s race, gender, sexuality, parental status, socioeconomic background, mental health, or any other aspect of our identity.

Most often, microaggressions are aimed at traditionally marginalized identity groups. Yet these hurtful actions can happen to anyone, of any background, at any professional level. A microaggression against a Black woman, for example, could be “You aren’t like the other Black people I know” (indicating the person is different from the stereotypes of Black people), whereas one for a white male might be, “Oh, you don’t ever have to worry about fitting in” (indicating that all white men are always comfortable and accepted). Essentially, microaggressions are based on a simple, damaging idea: “Because you are X, you probably are/are not or like/don’t like Y.”

One criticism of discourse about microaggressions is that our society has become “hypersensitive” and that casual remarks are now blown out of proportion. However, research is clear about the impact seemingly innocuous statements can have on one’s physical and mental health, especially over the course of an entire career: increased rates of depression, prolonged stress and trauma, physical concerns like headaches, high blood pressure, and difficulties with sleep. Microaggressions can negatively impact careers as they are related to increased burnout and less job satisfaction and require significant cognitive and emotional resources to recover from them. Further, the reality of the Great Resignation of 2021 has employers paying closer attention to how organizational culture can influence whether or not employees want to leave. One study found that 7 in 10 workers said they would be upset by a microaggression, and half said the action would make them consider leaving their job.

So the reality is that microaggressions are not so micro in terms of their impact. They should be taken seriously, because at their core they signal disrespect and reflect inequality.

To create inclusive, welcoming, and healthy workplaces, we must actively combat microaggressions. Doing so requires understanding how they show up and how to respond productively to them, whether they happen to us or to colleagues. Inclusive work environments are not just nice to have — they positively contribute to employee well-being and mental and physical health.

Building inclusive workplaces requires candid, authentic conversations on tough subjects, like sexism, homophobia, and racism — and it's natural to worry that we may commit microaggressions in these kinds of conversations by saying the wrong thing. The more awareness we have about how microaggressions show up, the more we can work toward decreasing them in the workplace. Yet the reality is that we all make mistakes, so you should know what to do if you witness a microaggression or commit one.

As I share in my forthcoming book about DEI, *The Necessary Journey*, awareness is always the first step. Here are some ways to become more aware of microaggressions, interrupt them when we see them, and promote workplace cultures with fewer microaggressions.

Being More Aware of Microaggressions

There are many words and phrases in the English language that are rooted in systemically favoring dominant groups in society. Thus many parts of our everyday speech have historical roots in racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. For example, the following terms you may casually hear in the workplace have hurtful connotations:

- “Blacklist” refers to a list of things that are seen negatively, juxtaposed against “whitelist,” a list of things that are seen positively.
- “Man up” equates gender with strength or competence.

- “Peanut gallery” originated in the 1800s and referred to the sections of segregated theaters usually occupied by Black people.

These words and phrases can trigger thoughts of current and past discrimination for people. Taking time to be intentional with the language you use is a significant part of treating each other with respect. While it’s unrealistic to know every cultural minefield that may exist in language, the goal is to be thoughtful about the origins of common phrases and, more importantly, to change your use of these terms if you become aware that they are problematic. For example, if you are looking to encourage someone, telling them to “rise to the moment” or “be brave” is a better way to communicate the sentiment than “man up.” It takes work to unlearn the many fraught words and phrases in our cultural lexicon, but most people find it’s not that difficult to do once they set their minds to actively being more inclusive.

Here are examples of a few types of microaggressions that you may hear within and outside the workplace:

- Race/Ethnicity
 - “I didn’t realize you were Jewish — you don’t look Jewish,” signaling that a person of the Jewish heritage has a stereotypical look. (Of course, similar statements happen to people from many backgrounds.)
 - “I believe the most qualified person should get the job,” signaling that someone is being given an unfair advantage because of their race.
- Citizenship
 - “Your English is so good — where are your parents from?” signaling that people with English as a second language are generally less capable of speaking English.
 - “But where are you *really* from?” signaling that where someone grew up isn’t their “true” origin. This

microaggression often happens to people who are in ethnic and racial minorities, whom others assume are immigrants.

- Class
 - “How did you get into that school?” signaling that someone’s background makes them an anomaly at a prestigious school.
 - “You don’t seem like you grew up poor,” signaling that someone from a particular socioeconomic background should look or behave a certain way.
- Mental health
 - “That’s insane” or “That’s crazy,” using terminology related to a mental health condition to describe surprise or astonishment.
 - “You don’t seem like you are depressed. Sometimes I get sad too,” minimizing the experiences of people with mental illness.
 - “Don’t mind my OCD!” using the acronym for obsessive compulsive disorder, a mental health condition where an individual is plagued by obsessive thoughts and fears that can lead to compulsions, to describe attention to detail, fastidiousness, or being organized.
- Gender
 - “Don’t be so sensitive,” signaling that someone, likely a woman, is being “too emotional” in a situation where a man would be more objective.
 - “Thanks, sweetheart” and similar comments often directed at women, which are often not appreciated or even offensive.
- Sexuality
 - “That’s so gay” to mean something is bad or undesirable, signaling that being gay is associated with negative and undesirable characteristics.
 - “Do you have a wife/husband?” which assumes heteronormative culture and behaviors, versus more inclusive phrasing such as “Do you have a partner?”

- Parental status
 - “You don’t have kids to pick up, so you can work later, right?” signaling that someone without children does not have a life outside of work.

In the workplace, microaggressions can happen in all types of conversations. For example, they may occur during hiring when someone is evaluating a candidate with a different demographic background than their own, during the performance evaluation process when someone is highlighting the positive or negative aspects of an employee, or in customer service when someone is interacting with customers who have a different first language than their own. We should all become more aware of microaggressions in general, but in professional environments, there should be a special level of attention to and care taken in the language we use.

Responding to Microaggressions

The more you increase your awareness of microaggressions, the more you will inevitably notice they are happening — and wonder how or if you should intercede. As with the advice given to victims of a microaggression, you have the option to respond in the moment or later on, or let it go.

There is no one right approach to dealing with microaggressions, but here are a few considerations for when you witness one:

1. What’s the right moment to say something?

Consider the environment and be thoughtful about how to create a safe space for the conversation. Think about whether the conversation is best had in the moment (possibly in front of other people) or one on one.

In some situations, an in-the-moment approach may be sufficient. For example, if someone accidentally misgenders a colleague in a meeting, a leader could say, “Let’s make sure we are using everyone’s correct pronouns,” and keep the meeting going. Doing this can make it less taboo to point out microaggressions and help to create a culture of positive in-the-moment correction when they happen.

But no one likes to be put on the spot, and conversations are much more likely to turn tense if your colleague feels like you are calling them out. So if you need to confront someone, try to “call them in” by creating a safe environment where you can engage the person in honest, authentic dialogue — without a client or other colleagues present — to say, “Hey, I know you didn’t mean it this way, but let’s not use language like...”

2. What’s your relationship to the person who made the comment?

Do you have a personal relationship with the person who committed the microaggression? If so, you might be able to simply say, “Hey, you made a comment earlier that did not sit well with me.”

However, if you do not have a personal relationship with the colleague, you may want to consider what you know about their personality (do they tend to be combative?) and history with uncomfortable conversations (are they generally approachable?). You may also need to bring in other colleagues they are closer with.

3. What’s your personal awareness of the microaggression’s subject?

Be honest about your level of familiarity with the subject at hand. For example, maybe you recognize that a comment is a racial microaggression, but you do not know the history or full implications of it. In that case, it’s OK to talk to the person, but

recognize you are not an authority on the topic, and consider learning more first or talking to someone who has more familiarity with the topic.

Once you realize a microaggression has been committed, and you decide to act, it's important to remind your friends or colleagues of the difference between *intent* and *impact*. While the speaker may not have intended the comment to be offensive, we must acknowledge the impact of our statements. Intent does not supersede or excuse actual impact. For example, you could say to the person, "I know you may have intended your statement to come off as _____, but the way I received it was _____." Sometimes simply highlighting the gap between intent and impact can be enlightening for the other person.

If You Realize You Have Committed a Microaggression

If someone tells you that you have said something offensive, this is an obvious moment to pause and consider the best way to handle the situation. Using your emotional intelligence, here are some steps to take:

Take a moment to pause.

Being called out can put us on the defensive, so breathe deeply and remember that everyone makes mistakes. In most cases committing a microaggression does not mean you are bad person; it signals that you have a chance to treat a colleague with greater respect and to grow on your DEI journey.

Taking a moment to pause, breathe, and reflect can help you avoid reacting with emotion and potentially saying something rash that could make the situation worse.

Ask for clarification.

If you are unsure what you did to offend your colleague, invite dialogue by asking for clarification. Say, "Could you say more about what you mean by that?"

Listen for understanding.

Listen to your colleague's perspective, even when you disagree. Far too often in uncomfortable conversations, we listen for the opportunity to speak and insert our own opinions instead of truly listening for understanding. To make sure you have understood your colleague's point of view, you could restate or paraphrase what you heard: "I think I heard you saying _____ [paraphrase their comments]. Is that correct?"

Acknowledge and apologize.

Once you process that harm has been done, you must acknowledge the offense and sincerely apologize for your statement. This is a moment to be honest, whether you lacked the knowledge of a certain word's history or made a comment that was insensitive. You could say something like, "I can now better understand how I was wrong in this situation. I will work to become more aware of _____ [the topic that you need to increase your cultural awareness of]."

Create space for follow-up.

The majority of these tough conversations take more than one conversation to work through. Allow yourself and your colleagues the opportunity to follow up in the future to continue the conversation, especially when cooler heads can prevail. You may say something like, "I would be happy to talk about this more in the future if you have any follow-up thoughts. I appreciate you taking the time to share your perspective with me."

What Leaders Should Know

While microaggressions often happen at the individual level, companies that say they are committed to inclusion should have zero tolerance for exclusionary or discriminatory language toward any employee. Leaders should set the standard by providing training on topics such as microaggressions. Yet,

because of the insidious nature of microaggressions, leaders and HR professionals have the responsibility to correct individuals when they become aware that these offenses have happened.

Many microaggressions can become part of an organization's culture if not corrected. For example, I have worked with some organizations where confusing people of the same race happened often and was casually overlooked as an honest mistake. While we all do make mistakes, when these same types of incidents happen consistently to the same groups of people, leaders need to correct the behavior. One client came to me with the issue that two Asian women on the same team were often called each other's name, giving them a feeling of interchangeability. I helped the client share with the firm some tools on how to politely correct someone in the moment, as well as provided some general reminders to the firm about why it's offensive to confuse two people of the same race. One thing that firm did was to push employees to learn each other's names and make sure to have individual interactions with new colleagues to get to know them. They even had a name challenge, with a prize, when they returned to the office after working remotely during the pandemic. In this way, the firm acted to not only call out inappropriate behavior but also shift the culture by making it clear that knowing colleagues' names was an important expectation for all team members.

Ultimately, getting better at noticing and responding to microaggressions — and at being more aware of our everyday speech — is a journey, one with a real effect on our mental health and well-being at work. Microaggressions affect everyone, so creating more inclusive and culturally competent workplace cultures means each of us must explore our own biases in order to become aware of them. The goal is not to be fearful of communicating with each other, but instead to embrace the opportunity to be intentional about it. Creating inclusive cultures where people can thrive does not happen overnight. It takes a continuous process of learning, evolving, and growing.

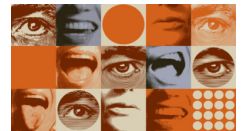
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