

A Guide to Avoiding Microaggression in the Workplace

While not always intended to cause harm, microaggressions can be classified as aggressive. Microaggressions in the workplace are particularly important to understand because it's essential for people to feel safe and included in their daily livelihoods.

As such, understanding microaggressions, how to avoid them and how to respond to them is important for keeping workplace peace and fostering a healthy, productive environment. This guide covers everything you need to know about microaggressions in the workplace.

What are microaggressions?

Microaggressions, which may be intentional or unintentional, are everyday slights or insults that communicate derogatory or negative messages that target people based on their group membership. Researchers have linked microaggressions to a range of negative outcomes, including depression and lowered self-esteem. In the workplace, minority groups often face subtle forms of discrimination via microaggressions.

Employees from traditionally marginalized groups may be passed over for promotions or subject to invasive personal questions about their background. These seemingly small acts can have a big impact on a team member's mental health. It's important to be aware of microaggressions and take steps to reduce their frequency. Increasing awareness can help create a more inclusive environment for everyone.

Microaggression examples

The most frequent types of microaggressions are microassaults, microinsults and microinvalidations. Many aggressors may not even be aware that they have crossed a line. Since the topic is rarely discussed, people may simply not know they're being insensitive toward someone's class, race, ethnicity, religion, age, sexual orientation, gender or physical ability. For this reason, it's helpful to be aware of the different types of microaggressions.

Microassaults

Microassaults are defined as offensive, rude and disrespectful verbal and nonverbal communications directed at individuals or groups. They include intentional subliminal insults, belittling or bullying.

People may display racially insensitive signs such as confederate flags or swastikas. They may make fun of a group's dress or cultural norms. The aim of intentional microassaults is to send a message that the marginalized group is inferior.

In some cases, microassaults can lead to feelings of anxiety, depression and isolation. They may also cause victims to question their self-worth and doubt their ability to succeed. Microassaults can create an atmosphere of hostility, making it difficult for individuals or groups to reach their full potential.

Microinsults

A microinsult is a comment communicating that a particular demographic isn't respected, but the target is seen as an exception to the negative stereotype. It's often intended as a compliment but is actually a direct insult to the person's background. The person delivering the insult often isn't aware that they've insulted the target. Here are some examples of microinsults:

“You’re less uptight than most women.”

“You’re tidier than most Chinese people.”

“You’re not as boring as most depressed people I know.”

In all of these cases, the offender indicates that the group the target belongs to has implicit negative characteristics, but that the target is an exception. So, while thinking they’re offering a compliment, they’re actually engaging in racial, gender or mental health prejudice.

Microinsults can also include evaluating a woman negatively, such as calling her “harsh” or “shrill” when she speaks with authority. Subliminal microinsults can include speaking over or ignoring her during meetings but encouraging speaking up in male participants. This propagates the implicit and old-fashioned norm that women should be passive and nurturing. Such reinforcement of unfair norms can greatly hinder a person’s ability to progress in their career.

Microinvalidations

Microinvalidations are small acts or comments that serve to undermine someone’s experience or identity. They can be intentional or unintentional but often have a damaging cumulative effect.

For example, a microinvalidation might be telling someone that their disability is “not that bad” or insisting that their preferred gender pronoun is incorrect. People may also downplay difficulties faced by disadvantaged groups by saying things like “It’s just as dangerous for men as it is for women”, “people don’t really discriminate against black people anymore”, and “it’s just as easy for you to get a promotion as it is for me.”

In these cases, the person is undermining the difficulties experienced by the person by expressing that discrimination doesn’t exist.

Microaggression in the workplace

Microaggression can be particularly harmful in the workplace because, oftentimes, there’s nothing a person can do to avoid them. If someone experiences microaggression in a social setting, they can easily leave or choose to spend time with people that aren’t microaggressive. However, leaving a meeting or workplace is not so simple. This is why it’s important for employers and employees to be aware of microaggressions, how they affect people and how to avoid them.

How to avoid microaggressions

Most businesses have human resource managers who have undergone diversity training. This training typically includes learning how to address and reduce workplace microaggressions. Employers are responsible for ensuring a safe and inclusive working environment for members of all demographics. As such, it’s important to take action against all types of discrimination, including microaggressions.

Here are some effective ways to reduce the number of microaggressions occurring in your company:

- Provide diversity and inclusion training for all managers and employees, not just the human resources manager

- Set up a complaint system where people can voice concerns and report incidences

Foster a company culture of inclusion

Hire from diverse groups

Host group discussions to provide a platform for suggestions on ways to make the environment more inclusive

These are steps you can take at the company level to improve the conditions for marginalized individuals. Moreover, to avoid committing microaggressions yourself, you can educate yourself about them, practice conscious speaking and be open to listening if someone tells you you've crossed a line.

What to do if you've committed a microaggression

Since microaggressions have only recently become openly discussed as a form of prejudice, society is still learning how to navigate them. If someone tells you you've said or done something offensive, it's a good idea to pause and evaluate how to proceed. By following these steps, you can ensure you deal with it in the best possible way:

Pause. If you were saying something that someone pointed out as offensive, stop what you are saying and try to evaluate what was offensive. Was there something that you said that had explicit or implicit negative connotations about a person or group of people?

Ask for clarification. Whether you think you've identified what was offensive or not, ask the person for clarification. Hopefully, they'll understand that it was a mistake and respond calmly.

Listen to their response. Be attentive to what they have to say and try to understand why they think it was offensive. It can be helpful to summarize what they've said back to them to double-check that you've understood.

Apologize or follow up. If, upon reflection, you agree that you've said something harmful, acknowledge it and apologize. Alternatively, ask for further clarification and continue to calmly discuss the situation with them. Try to understand their point and promote a friendly, productive conversation.

The challenges of confronting microaggressions

If you feel like you've experienced microaggressions at work, it can be difficult to know how to deal with them. They may be especially difficult to deal with if the derogatory comment wasn't intended to cause harm, but rather, resulted from unconscious bias. As such, it's important to take the time to think through the complex nature of microaggressions. Rather than applying a "one-size-fits-all" approach, deal with them on a case-by-case basis.

It can be helpful to ask yourself questions such as:

Was this really a microaggression?

Did the person intend to cause harm?

Would this person be receptive to my feedback?

Is this worth reporting to HR?

It's important to understand the challenges and risks of reporting or pointing out microaggressions. Because microaggressions are often subtle, they are difficult to prove. It may

also lead to workplace conflict or feelings of awkwardness. It helps to be prepared for the aftermath of reporting a microaggression, so be sure to consider it and how you'll deal with it.

How to respond to microaggressions

How you deal with a microaggression may depend on the severity of the incident. If it was clearly not intended as harmful but was a result of the person's implicit bias, it may be worth taking the opportunity to express how you feel. It offers the other person a chance to learn while also minimizing the negative impact of reporting. In general, you can think about responding in three steps.

Did it actually happen? It can be difficult to discern whether something was, in fact, a microaggression. Before reporting, be sure that it happened and know how to explain it.

Is it worth reporting? Every individual needs to decide whether reporting is worth it for them or not. If it will only make your situation worse, it's worth considering if it's the best thing for you. Weigh up the pros and cons, and decide what feels best.

How to respond? If you decide that responding is the most appropriate action, consider how you'll do this, whether informally through a conversation or formally through reporting to HR.

There is more than one way to respond to microaggressions. Every offense differs in severity, so the response should be a reflection of the severity. Here are three ways to respond:

Address the individual

Being direct with the person who made the offensive comment may be the most reasonable thing to do. This is especially true if you don't think there was intentional malice behind what they did or said. If they're open and receptive, it can be a learning opportunity for them and a chance to enhance cooperative office relationships.

Address the group

If more than one person was involved, consider addressing all of them, either at once or individually. This is often much more difficult than simply addressing one person. However, it may be worth it if it will improve their knowledge and prevent the same thing from recurring.

Contact your HR department

If you believe the microaggression was malicious or if it's an ongoing problem, contact your HR department or manager about it. It may be worth writing down the dates and times and describing exactly what happened to present it as evidence.

Microaggressions are an ongoing problem in society. They can cause individuals from minority demographics to feel excluded, threatened and unwelcome. While people aren't always aware they're committing microaggressions, they can cause emotional harm to the victim. Education and training are important to avoid microaggressions in the workplace.

