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How To Combat Microaggressions in the Workplace



According to Merriam-Webster, a microaggression is “a comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group (such as a racial minority).” Microaggressions often take the form of back-handed compliments and can sometimes be made with good intentions. But good intentions don't erase the harm.

Three out of five Americans have witnessed or experienced a potential microaggression in the workplace, according to SurveyMonkey research conducted in partnership with *Fortune*. Microaggressions spring from implicit bias, which Merriam-Webster defines as “a prejudice that is present but not consciously held or recognized.”

Look out for these common microaggressions at work

“You’re so articulate!”

This statement conveys surprise that an employee speaks fluent and clear English. While this may be intended as a compliment, it is actually patronizing and implies that they are not expected to speak fluently based on their appearance or accent.

“Where are you actually from?”

Would this be asked of a White coworker? Probably not. Asking others to share details of their ethnicity, ancestry or nationality can be intrusive and minimizing.

“You don’t look/sound/act trans [or gay/biracial/Muslim/etc.].”

There is no one way to identify with something. Comments like this are insulting to those on the receiving end of them, regardless of the speaker's intent.

“Do you know so-and-so...?”

Assuming a coworker knows a specific person because they share an identity implies that all people of a shared identity know each other. Clearly, that is incorrect. Worse, it suggests that people who share an identity are a monolith, which is a common misperception of marginalized groups.

“You’re wearing a great outfit today.”

Saying this to a friend outside of work might be nice, but commenting on a coworker’s clothing or appearance might suggest objectification and, over time, could even lead to sexual harassment allegations. If someone only ever compliments a coworker on their physical appearance, it suggests that that person's value resides in how they look rather than who they are and what they bring to the team.

“The way you overcame your disability really inspires me.”

Disability is an individual and personal thing. The word “overcame” undercuts that employee’s daily relationship with their disability. Plus, a coworker’s disability doesn’t exist to make someone else feel better. It is hurtful to center oneself in someone else’s disability.

“Do you know what Instagram is?”

Assuming that older employees don't know a lot about technology is ageist. It's important to remember that everyone has a unique relationship to technology and shouldn't be squeezed into a generational stereotype.

“Is that your real hair?”

This is personal information and unrelated to the duties of the workplace. Black women in particular face this kind of invasion. Hair is often a form of cultural expression and is not an invitation for intrusive queries.

Impact on health and well-being

Microaggressions go much further than social discomfort. The Center for Health Journalism reports that they can actually lead to physical and psychological health concerns, including but limited to:

- Low self-esteem
- Hypervigilance
- Avoidance
- Depression
- Aggression

How to address microaggressions at work

Microinterventions

To be an active bystander, follow these three steps when witnessing someone use a microaggression:

- Verbally identify the problem aloud
- Tell the offender why their words are harmful
- Redirect the conversation by moving onto a different topic

You may also find it useful to take the offender aside afterwards for further discussion on why their words caused harm.

It's also a good idea to check in privately with the harmed employee. Gauge the situation by asking them if they want to talk about how they're feeling, either with you or someone else. Ask if they're all right and if there's anything you can do for them.

Proactive measures

Organizations looking to promote effective, lasting change should do the following:

- Incorporate *microaggressions* and *implicit bias* into inclusion and equity practices
- Train employees on microinterventions
- Raise awareness of what not to say
- Institute protective policies
- Provide space and tools for, open discussion, private conference and collective healing

Test yourself

You can even explore your own implicit biases with Harvard University's widely used [Implicit Association Test](#). The topics range from race and sexuality to weight and age, among others. Note that the purpose of this test is to educate people on implicit bias rather than to produce diagnoses.

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