
Understanding the Impact of Microaggressions

By: Robin Pedrelli

2020 marked a turning point in this country. In light of unprecedented challenge and upheaval ranging from a global pandemic to civil unrest in the wake of police brutality disproportionately leveled against people of color, we are seeing people of all races, ages and ethnicities stepping in and speaking up. Once again, we are reminded of the great disparity in the distribution of wealth and power we face as a nation as incidents that are too significant to ignore painfully bring these unpleasant truths to the forefront. The problem is systemic and widespread, impacting our economic, political, educational, healthcare and criminal justice systems. In our communities and workplaces alike, people are finally engaging in real conversations about race, justice, diversity, equality, and inclusion. With this amplified focus comes hope that we will finally address these issues in a meaningful and substantial way.

The problem is systemic and requires an integrated approach. We need to address these challenges at the macro-level or systemic level. This means tackling disparity head on in our hiring practices. Once and for all putting an end to pay inequity. Addressing bias in our talent management and performance management systems. It means setting real actionable goals and holding people accountable to those goals.

But we also need to address this problem at the micro-level or individual level by being more aware of how the little things that are said or done on an individual basis impact overall corporate culture and personal well-being. We must stop tolerating microaggressions in our workplaces.

Microaggressions are the “*brief and commonplace verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults to the target person or group.*”

These are incidents in which someone accidentally (or purposely) makes an offensive statement or asks an insensitive question. Microaggressions are often disguised as a joke and are coupled with the sentiment that people just need to lighten up. But there is nothing funny about it. And while the intent may not be malicious and in most cases stems from ignorance, such comments tend to delegitimize members of the minority group targeted by the comment. Furthermore, microaggressions highlight difference in ways that put the recipient's non-conformity into the spotlight, which can threaten one's sense of belonging and can cause anxiety, frustration and loneliness.

While each incident on its own appears micro or small, the cumulative effect can be quite significant. And let's face it, these microaggressions never exist in isolation. They are indicative of the underlying unconscious bias that is prevalent in our society and our workplaces. At the individual level this can erode self-esteem, self-confidence, and well-being and can cause an employee to feel disconnected from their work and their coworkers. At the organizational level, microaggressions can negatively impact overall engagement, productivity and turnover rates.

Some common examples of microaggressions

- A coworker is recognized for an idea you shared earlier in the conversation.
- Being left out of social gatherings or breakroom conversations.
- Confusing the names of the only two people of color on the team.
- Creating nicknames for people whose names are hard for you to pronounce.
- Being repeatedly asked to take notes in meetings or order the refreshments.
- Scheduling important company meetings over religious holidays.
- Expecting employees of a minority group to represent the views of all people in that group
- Using offensive terminology, such as, "That's so gay" or "Don't be such a girl."

Some common examples of micro-aggressive comments

- "Wow, you don't look transgender – you're so pretty."
- "It must be your time of the month."
- "Your hair is so pretty when you straighten it. You should do it all the time."
- "White privilege doesn't exist."
- "When I look at you, I don't see color"

Inclusion requires us to pay attention to the big picture – like our hiring and performance management policies practices – as well as the small actions and messaging we use and tolerate in our workplaces every day. Be aware of your own words and actions and how they may be affecting the people around you. But also pay attention to what you coworkers are doing and saying and be prepared to speak up and step in. If the target of a microaggression attempts to address the situation, it can be risky and met with retaliation depending on the power dynamics at play. An ally can be instrumental in highlighting and changing these behaviors because they can advocate with less risk and in a way that can more easily be heard. We all need to work at recognizing these behaviors and making a conscious effort to change these patterns.

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