

Managing a Divided Workforce

Understanding microaggressions & how to address it in the workplace

Only 10 years ago, the term, “microaggressions” was a barely known concept, but it has been impacting workplaces long before the word found its way into daily use. Microaggressions are every day, subtle comments or behaviors that communicate some sort of bias toward historically marginalized groups.

Microaggressions manifest differently than blatant acts of discrimination. While they are based on the same core ideas about people who are minorities or who are marginalized, microaggressions differ from overtly racist, sexist, or homophobic acts or

comments committed intentionally (i.e., Discrimination) because they typically occur outside the level of conscious awareness. Examples include questions like “What are you?” which the offender may consider an innocent inquiry. Other potentially offensive comments like “you speak English well” may be intended as a compliment.



Why leaders / organizations need to take them seriously:

1. Although seemingly small and sometimes innocent offenses, they can take a real psychological and physical toll on the health of their recipients. [Research](#) on microaggressions provides strong evidence that they lead to elevated levels of depression and trauma among minorities. In a sample of 405 students at an undergraduate university, depressive symptoms were the link in [the relationship](#) between racial microaggressions and thoughts of suicide.
2. Not only do microaggressions harm mental health, but they can also impact physical health because they undermine trust in service providers and caregivers. This mistrust can influence both willingness to seek medical services and compliance with following directives from their healthcare provider.
3. Microaggressions aren't usually intended to be discriminatory, however, they can still cause marginalized individuals to feel excluded or discriminated against by perpetuating stereotypes. While they are rarely hostile in and of themselves, they have been shown to contribute to a hostile work environment. In employment discrimination law, Title VII does not prohibit conduct that is merely

offensive, and in most cases, microaggressions fall into this category. As of now, microaggressions are, for the most part, still not seen as a form of discrimination on their own in a court of law. Be aware, though, even if microaggressions might not stand alone as a basis for an employment discrimination lawsuit, they could still be used to bolster a case.

What can leaders / organizations do to minimize microaggressions among their workforces?

First, leaders need to accept that microaggressions are happening all around us in the workplace. Resisting the notion that this type of behavior occurs can ultimately hurt the organization. Whether you have committed or witnessed a microaggression, acknowledge the occurrence and seek to make the situation right. **Second**, advocate for annual cultural competence training. **Third**, encourage *everyone* within the organization to:



Be vigilant - Take regular stock of your own biases and fears so that they don't subconsciously impact your behavior.



Become curious - Consider the ways your words and actions are perceived by others and make it a habit to stop for a second before you speak to create awareness of what you are thinking.



Seek out varied interactions - Find ways to learn about and interact with people who differ from you.



Accept feedback - Really listen to understand when people explain why certain remarks offend them. Create a work culture where constructive sharing and receiving of feedback is sanctioned.

As a leader, it is important to understand it's more typical that a recipient of microaggression ignores it because they are so common it would be difficult to address everyone as they happen. Should an employee come to you with this concern, along with the necessary actions you need to take as a manager, you can assist them with determining how they can respond. Providing employees with strategies to use can create a culture of trust where emotional well-being is prioritized. Dr. Kevin Nadal developed a tool kit called the [Guide to Responding to Microaggressions](#). It lists *five questions to ask* when weighing the consequences of responding to a microaggression.

1. *If I respond, could my physical safety be in danger?*
2. *If I respond, will the person become defensive, and will this lead to an argument?*
3. *If I respond, how will this affect my relationship with this person (e.g., co-worker, family member, etc.)*
4. *If I don't respond, will I regret not saying something?*
5. *If I don't respond, does that convey that I accept the behavior or statement?*

Additionally, Diane Goodman, a social justice and diversity consultant, suggests that before moving forward with confronting the microaggression, you should assess the goals of your response to decide if and how you want to respond:

1. Do you simply want to be heard?
2. Are you interested in educating the other person and letting them know they did something offensive?

Identifying and addressing microaggressions in the workplace can be a challenge but it is a necessary part of creating a work environment where all feel included and valued. Utilize the Ulliance Account Management team for additional consultation navigating this difficult workplace dynamic.

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