

Microaggressions and microinterventions: Responding to bias

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Abstract

Creating an organizational climate of inclusion is crucial to have a thriving entity. One potential barrier to inclusion are microaggressions. Microaggressions are the everyday unintentional messages that target individuals based on some aspect of their identity. It is important to combat these microaggressions by incorporating strategies of intervention. These strategies fall in to one of the 5 Ds (direct, delegate, delay, distract, document). By addressing microaggressions we can create an environment where we all thrive.

Key words: microaggressions, bias, inclusion

Why do we do this work?

Any conversation on diversity, equity and inclusion has to start with a fundamental question: why do we do this work? We all have a reason for being in this field and it is important to remember who keeps us going. For me, it is my family. My mother was an immigrant from Mexico City and my father was from Sterling, Ill., where he grew up second generation Mexican American. I often think of the experiences that they had in their early lives and how this shaped them and informs who I am as a person. Why do you do our work?

Microaggressions

Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership (Sue 2010). Typically, microaggressions fall in to one of the following three categories:

- Microassaults – Deliberate and intentional slights or insults that are meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior and purposeful discriminatory actions.
- Microinsults – Verbal and nonverbal communications that subtly convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's heritage or identity.
- Microinvalidations – Communications that subtly exclude, negate or nullify the thoughts, feeling or experiential reality of a marginalized individual.

It is often hard to see why microaggressions are so damaging. Often when we think about bias we think of macroaggressions like racial slurs. We know clearly why these are exclusionary. With microaggressions, the damage comes from the long-term cumulative effect of them. Individuals usually encounter several microaggressions every single day, day after day. Over time, these acts wear away at the individual and create lasting damage.

I made a mistake, what do I do?

In a perfect world, microaggressions would never happen but this is unrealistic. Microaggressions will happen at your organization; you will use a microaggression, I have and will as well in the future. The goal is not to be perfect but to know how to respond when we perform a microaggression. So, what can you do when someone says you have performed a microaggression:

- Sincere apology
- Listen to the other party, don't argue with them
- Focus on the impact of your words, not what your intentions were
- Validate what the other party is saying/feeling
- Learn from your mistake
- Do not expect the person you hurt to be your teacher; there are many resources that you can tap into

Microinterventions: Organizational change

In addition to our own behavior change, we can also address microaggressions in our organizations through microinterventions. These microinterventions are a form of bystander intervention. This is recognizing a potentially harmful situation or interaction and choosing to respond in a way that could positively influence the outcome. Potential microinterventions you could use fall in to five categories called the 5 Ds:

- Direct – addressing the microaggression directly and in the moment with the person
- Delegate – recruiting another person to talk with the individual who is performing the microaggression because you know they have a better relationship
- Delay – wait to address the person in a different setting, such as when you are alone if it is a group setting
- Distract – in a group interaction try to change the subject to end the microaggression and make sure the person being harmed is ok
- Document – make sure the incident is documented so that if an ongoing pattern emerges appropriate actions can be taken

Conclusion

By addressing microaggressions in our organizations, we can create an inclusive environment where all individuals can thrive. This organizational change is led by our personal growth and awareness and by leading by example. When mistakes do occur, it is important to address them as quickly as possible and to make sure that we grow from these mistakes.

Reference

1. Sue DW. *Microaggressions in everyday life: Race, gender, and sexual orientation*. John Wiley & Sons Inc.; 2010.

