



## Microaggression at Work



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We first heard the term “microaggression” at Far West Family Services just a few years ago, when a teacher of color called for support in dealing with multiple situations at work. Since then, we’ve heard the term more and more frequently from clients of color. Microaggression is not new. It has always been present, but more people are willing to call it out now.

According to Wikipedia, “Microaggression is a term used for brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative attitudes toward stigmatized or culturally marginalized groups.”

If you are experiencing microaggressions at work, you are probably feeling hurt and stressed, and unsure about what to do. Conversely, if you learn that you have committed a microaggression toward a colleague, you may not know how to make things right. This dynamic takes its toll on personal and professional relationships in the workplace.

While microaggression can be unintentional, this kind of statement or action is meant to keep a person of color in their place. The targeted individual receives the message that their opinion is unimportant, or their status is “less than.” The statement or action is damaging, whether or not the aggressor was aware of the impact.

One teacher of color reported that she had made a suggestion in a staff meeting that was flatly turned down by the principal, while a week later, a white teacher made the same suggestion, which was then welcomed by the same principal.

A Black paraeducator says she doesn’t feel safe expressing her opinions about subtle racism in the school. At a faculty meeting, she was shut down when she reported that Black students don’t feel safe offering their opinions in class because teachers dismiss their ideas.

Other examples of microaggression: (from “When and How to Respond to Microaggressions” from *the Harvard Business Review*<sup>1</sup>. See below.)

<u>Racist statement</u>	<u>Meaning</u>
<b>“When I see you, I don’t see color.”</b>	<b>The speaker doesn’t acknowledge your Blackness or won’t hold it against you</b>
<b>“We are all one race: the human race.”</b>	<b>Your experience as a Black person is no different from the experience of people of other races</b>
<b>“You are so articulate.”</b>	<b>Black people are not usually capable of competent intellectual conversation</b>
<b>“I see your hair is big today! Are you planning to wear it like that to the meeting?”</b>	<b>Natural Black hairstyles are not professional</b>
<b>“Everyone can succeed in society if they work hard enough.”</b>	<b>Disparate outcomes for Black people result from laziness</b>

Another example is the unwillingness to learn how to pronounce a “difficult” or “foreign” name or giving someone a nickname that’s more “white-sounding.”

There is also a way of talking in code about a person of color that tries to hide a racist meaning. “But your skin is so light!” Meaning “but you don’t look black.”

#### What is the cost?

If you recognize yourself in any of these microaggressions, you might be thinking, “What’s the big deal? I didn’t mean to hurt anyone.” Or “Why make a mountain out of a molehill?” The statement or action might seem insignificant to you, or it may have been accidental. But it insults the listener. Experiencing these insults on a regular basis adds up; little cuts become bigger and bigger wounds. It’s exhausting.

“The experience of having to question whether something happened to you because of your race or constantly being on edge because your environment is hostile, can often leave people feeling invisible, silenced, angry, and resentful,” says Dr. Joy Bradford, licensed psychologist, speaker, and host of the mental health podcast, *Therapy for Black Girls*.

“Additionally,” writes Dr. Bradford, “The increased stress related to microaggressions in the workplace and experiences with discrimination can lead to physical concerns like headaches, high blood pressure, and difficulties with sleep, which of course impact our mood as well.”<sup>2</sup>

These experiences also lead to feelings of alienation, lack of emotional safety, and loss of community and camaraderie, which can make the workplace place a lonely and unsatisfying place to be.

#### What to do when you’ve committed a microaggression?

Go to the person you’ve hurt or insulted. Be humble. Listen. Acknowledge that the other person was hurt by your words or actions—regardless of what your intention was. Apologize. Commit to learning and becoming more of an anti-racist.

Finally, pay attention to the messages you send to people of color. And follow the advice of the writer, Maya Angelou, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”



#### Sources for this article:

<sup>1</sup> “When and How to Respond to Microaggressions”

By Ella F. Washington, PhD, Alison Hall Birch, PhD, Laura Morgan Roberts, PhD (Harvard Business Review)

<sup>2</sup> “Understanding Racial Microaggression and Its Effect on Mental Health, from Your Health” from Pfizer Health. August 26, 2020