
Overcoming Microaggressions And The Bystander Effect In The Workplace

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For most of my career, I've worked as an administrative assistant in one capacity or another. I love helping people and being the "go to" person to make things happen. When I support my team, even in the smallest way, that helps them succeed, then I succeed. But in the past, there have been those, that seem to think that because my job title includes the word "assistant" that makes me less somehow. Sometimes it's been little slights like someone checking their email or cell phones when I'm trying to talk to them, being left out of team discussions that I could be useful to be a part of, being talked down to, and so much more. Over the years I've grown a thick skin, and for the most part, can just brush it off but every now and then one slips through and makes me think "ouch". By no means do I feel like these microaggressions carry the same weight as other more serious ones, but they have helped me to recognize and feel for those around me that are experiencing them too. The hardest part for me has always been knowing what to do to help.

What are microaggressions?

Columbia University professor Derald Wing Sue defines microaggressions as "the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership." Though the truth is that given the right situation, anyone can be the victim or perpetrator of microaggressions.

Microaggressions in the Workplace

Microaggressions in the workplace run the gambit from phrases like "you speak excellent English", mansplaining or constant interruptions, lack of attention, asking someone if that's their "real" hair, or choosing not to sit next to someone because of their color or size, and even requiring an individual to provide more evidence of competency than their peers. During many of these instances, the individual perpetrating the microaggression has no idea that their behavior or language is hurtful, harmful, or inappropriate. And the recipient often discounts it thinking "did that really just happen" or wondering if they are being too sensitive.

Individually microaggressions may seem small or inconsequential, but when they are repeatedly dealt with it compounds into a major issue. Many experiencing repeated microaggressions often have a decline in productivity, a harder time learning, feel disempowered and isolated. Those witnessing it often experience a version of the bystander effect and struggle with whether or not to say or do something as well. Many experience guilt or rationalize thinking that since the victim isn't doing anything about it, that maybe it doesn't bother them, assume someone else will step up, have fear of becoming a target themselves, or other harsher consequences, especially when the perpetrator is in a position of authority.

What is the bystander effect?

The bystander effect is the phenomenon that occurs when a person needs help or is in danger, and most bystanders are reluctant to intervene and simply stand by without assisting. While most of the studies regarding this phenomenon focus on extreme cases involving dangerous or traumatic events, it's something that is also occurring within the workplace, though usually regarding situations of harassment, discrimination, and microaggressions.

Taken all together a workplace culture of regularly overlooked microaggressions with a consistent bystander effect can build an environment of anxiety, distrust, disempowerment, and if unchecked, ultimately, a toxic, unsafe workplace.

How can we change and make a difference?

When you are the recipient of microaggressions directly:

Most people don't want to be jerks, but even if they did, once you clearly and professionally point out the issue and how it can be resolved, it puts the responsibility back on the perpetrator. Try using the D.E.A.R. Structure presented at the STFM Conference on Medical Student Education

- Describe: Describe the situation. Stick to the facts.
- Express: Express your feelings using "I" statements.
- Ask/Assert: Ask for what you want
- Reinforce: Reward (reinforce) the person ahead of time by explaining the positive effects of getting what you want.

Find an ally. Asking for help is hard, but sometimes it can make all the difference.

Remember, that many times microaggressions are unintentional, once someone knows that their behavior is harmful, most of the time they will stop. If not, don't be afraid to report it. You have the right to a safe and non-toxic work environment.

When you witness someone else experiencing them become an ally:

- Intervene
- Invite them to speak (love this one as it immediately gives the power back to the victim)
- Refer & encourage
- Change the dynamics in the room by being an advocate
- Don't take part
- Give them your full attention
- Don't interrupt
- Echo & attribute
- Learn the language (using the right pronouns, etc.)
- Listen & learn
- Don't encourage the behavior
- Do not stand by and watch
- Make it clear you won't be involved in the behavior

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- Don't take part in harassing, teasing, or spreading gossip about others verbally, through instant messaging or on social networking sites like Facebook
 - Don't advertise the poor treatment, especially online
 - Do not acknowledge, reply or forward messages or photos that could be hurtful or embarrassing
 - Approach the recipient:
 - Let them know you are aware of the behavior and that it's not acceptable
 - Encourage them to ask for help, go with them to get help, or provide them with information about where to go for help
 - Let them know they are not alone

Organizations should

- Create a culture that normalizes allyship, diversity, and inclusion.
- Establish clear behavior policies that state what behavior is required, what behavior is outlawed, what the consequences for breach are, and implement them consistently
- Ensure employees know how to recognize inappropriate behavior, and how to report it:
- Provide all employees with training (induction and ongoing) on
 - Sensitivity and how to recognize unlawful behaviors, including discrimination, bullying and sexual harassment
 - The role the 'supportive bystander' plays and how to intervene effectively (consider including in your policies a positive duty to report or intervene)
 - How to report inappropriate behavior, including who to go to, and any whistle-blower procedure and protections
- Provide managers with training on
 - How to triage or respond to a complaint, including whistle-blowers (if applicable)
 - How to protect the victim and bystander (whether anonymous or not)
- Make sure that if employees do report behavior that it will be dealt with fairly and not "swept under the rug", or result in a backlash against themselves or the victim.

When you discover you have microaggressive behaviors (because sometimes we can all be a jerk):

Don't forget that a sincere apology and correction in behavior can go a long way to improving relationships with those you may have unintentionally hurt.

- Be constantly vigilant of your own behaviors and fears
- Experiential reality (exposure to the things you have a bias against to learn more about it and discover how to correct it)
- Don't be defensive, be willing to learn and re-learn until you get it right
- Be open to discussing your own attitudes or biases
- Become an ally (see above).

I believe that most people don't want to cause harm to others or stand by while it happens to someone else and feel like they can't do anything to help. By educating ourselves, our workforce, and by fostering allyship, sensitivity to diversity and inclusion, we create a safe work environment that empowers and enables a healthier, more productive workforce.