

STRONG PRACTICES GUIDE



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The Major Problem of Microaggressions

Workshop Follow-Up + Key Learnings

The following is a ~20-30 minute follow-up to reinforce the key learnings of “The Major Problem of Microaggressions: Taking Action in Challenging Moments” training, and to offer additional resources to continue your learning.

4 things to remember about microaggressions

Microaggressions are:

1. Enacted in day-to-day interactions (as opposed to barriers or discrimination that exist, for example, in institutions, policies, or laws)
2. Often subtle rather than explicit, delivered casually, and disguised as a “compliment,” “advice,” or “just being curious”
3. Often unintended, unnoticed, easily deniable by those perpetrating the harm and assumed to have little or no (i.e. “micro”) impact
4. Constant, continual, and cumulative over a lifetime and have significant, macro-level impact on those experiencing the harms.

For more on leading research on the impacts of microaggressions, explore the work of Dr. Derald Wing Sue. Here is a [~7 minute video](#), and you can find more about the Themes and Underlying Messages of Microaggressions in [this document](#).



5 things to remember about being an active bystander

As a reminder, we explored the following scenario in the session:

You have worked closely with Dev and Taylor for two years. In a conversation with you and Taylor, Dev mentions this experience:

Dev: *Do you remember in the meeting last week when I pitched that we could partner with another department for the project next year, and everyone either stonewalled me or said it wasn't relevant? Well, today I noticed that Pat sent around an email proposing the exact same thing I suggested and people are so into it!*

Taylor: *I mean, we've worked together for a while now, so I feel like I can say this, and I hope you don't take it the wrong way, Dev, but sometimes you can be kind of dominant. Maybe if you were a bit less aggressive with your approach people would listen to you and take you more seriously.*

Dev: *Ok...*

(At first, you simply witness and absorb this interaction, but don't say anything.)



For the purposes of this summary, let's assume that Dev experiences less power (whether as a result of their identity and/or their position within the organization) than Taylor and Pat. Rather than just a singular experience of harm, Dev (and other marginalized people) often have a layered experience of harm. In this scenario, Dev experiences the “triple harm”:

- not being listened to or taken seriously in a group setting
- having their idea received/valued when repeated by another team member with more social and/or organizational privilege (and not being given any credit for the idea)
- being invalidated and blamed for their experience when they chose to disclose it to others.

Below are some concepts and themes to expand on our discussion:

1. Power, Privilege, and Social Responsibility

Microaggressions can be perpetrated and experienced by anyone - between communities (i.e. vertical violence) and within communities (i.e. lateral violence). That said, due to inequities in power, it's more likely to happen to people who are marginalized by people who hold privilege.

If you are on the benefitting end of a power imbalance, it is your responsibility to work to dismantle the system that creates that power imbalance. Too often, a marginalized person or group is told that they could become “un-oppressed” if they just worked hard enough and in the right ways. And too often, it is those with privilege who remain silent or unengaged in moments of microaggression, thereby reinforcing the dominant systems that produce the power imbalances and microaggressions in the first place.

Those who benefit from a power imbalance are often better positioned to intervene because there will be social risk involved. Those with more power are more likely both to be buffered from harm, and also more likely to be listened to. For example, if a person with a disability asks their coworker not to use the word “[lame](#),” they may be told they are “too sensitive,” “nitpicky,” “challenging to work with,” or “pushing an agenda.” But if an abled person brings up the same feedback, they're more likely to be seen as “socially conscious” or “inclusive.”

Remember that intervention is still meaningful and important even when an impacted person or group isn't perceived to be in the room. When deciding whether to intervene when you witness something harmful, instead of asking yourself: “Is there a [woman/person of colour/disabled person/...] in the room?” you could ask yourself, “Is it possible that sexism/racism/ableism/... is being enacted/reinforced at this moment?” Intervening whether or not you perceive an individual to be personally harmed by shifts the focus (and impact) from the individual to the systemic level.



2. Safety vs. Comfort

Those who witness microaggressions often go through a rapid sequence of decision-making to assess how and whether they'll intervene. This process involves assessing one's own personal risk, vulnerability, and safety as an intervener, which is often influenced by elements of identity and seniority. For example, even though a man may be well positioned to intervene (and be listened to and taken seriously) in an instance of subtle sexism, if that man is Black, he would also have other considerations about being labelled as dominant, aggressive, or angry if he chooses to speak up. Sometimes, it does feel unsafe to intervene, and we can have compassion for ourselves if a moment arises and we don't intervene right then and there.

At the same time, we also need to discern whether there is truly a threat to our safety, or if what we are feeling is the unavoidable discomfort of interrupting the status quo. Sometimes, we may conflate feeling uncomfortable with feeling unsafe, and as a result, disengage from addressing a microaggression. Sacrificing some comfort (privilege's accomplice) to increase the safety of a marginalized person or group is what bystander intervention is all about.

3. Intention and Impact

The vast majority of harm that people experience in the workplace is not intentional. That said, if harm is caused, it is still important to take responsibility for the impact of our words/actions. Take the analogy of being at fault in a car accident: Your intention certainly wasn't to hurt anyone, but if harm was caused, it would still be your responsibility to do the work of repairing damage done, even though the harm wasn't malicious.

Two common mistakes in situations like the scenario we worked through:

- i) If we assume that Pat and/or Taylor experience privilege in multiple layers of their identity (race, gender, ability, ...) we are more likely to give Pat and Taylor the benefit of the doubt or write a "misunderstood good person" story on their behalf (i.e. list all the ways in which Pat *isn't* sexist and or give reasons for why these particular comments/actions might not be racist, etc.).
- ii) We fall into "[good/bad](#)" binaries, assuming that only "bad people" who are intentionally sexist (or racist or ableist...) enact sexist (or racist or ableist...) behaviours, and that "good people" don't replicate systemic harms. For example, saying, "Pat is a really good person, so I'm sure he didn't mean it that way." Intention certainly matters, and at the same time, it is equally important to acknowledge that we can (and often do) contribute to oppressive patterns or replicate oppressive beliefs and behaviours unintentionally.

Instead of focusing solely on intention or solely on impact, we can remember that we're all steeped in oppressive systems, and that we enact harms every day, in both subtle and explicit ways. Pat and Taylor aren't the worst people in the world. Still, they are responsible for reinforcing oppressive systems when taking credit for Dev's idea or blaming Dev for the experience they had, even if they "meant well."



4. Root in Consent and Foster Self-Determination

If a person who is directly affected by a microaggression is present (i.e. Dev), take leadership from them on what they'd like from you. Check in directly: "Are you ok?" "Do you want to leave this interaction?" In a follow-up conversation, you can say, "I'm really sorry that happened. How can I best support you?" The last thing we want to do is take someone's agency away by putting on our Hero Hat (i.e. saviourism) and swooping in with an intervention that does more harm than good. Follow the lead of the person(s) most impacted, even if you think you know what might be the best way forward. When possible, have conversations with people before microaggressions happen and ask how they'd like to be supported if/when they happen. Honouring someone's agency means respecting that, after experiencing a microaggression, the person who was harmed may not want to have much, or any, conversation with you about it. Although your intentions are to help, entering into a forced debrief with you might be experienced as another layer of harm or unwanted labour.

Imagine a moment where you hear a microaggression and you do not perceive there to be anyone in the room who might be directly harmed by that comment (e.g. a sexist comment when no women are in the room, and racist comment when no people of colour are perceived to be in the room). Rooting in agency and consent does not mean going to a marginalized colleague, telling them what happened, and asking what you should do about it. Instead, this would be a moment where using your privilege to intervene in some way directly with the person who said the comment, or checking in with other people who witnessed the interaction to develop a group response strategy, would likely be the best way forward.

5. Relationships of Ongoing Care

Practicing bystander intervention is both about shortening our reaction time in challenging/violent moments, and about investing in relationships long term. On an ongoing basis, check in with people who regularly experience microaggressions and see how they're doing. On an ongoing basis, check in with people who are enacting microaggressions - don't be afraid to re-open conversations after an intervention or to address a microaggression after some time has passed. It's never too late!

With the above scenario, your strategies might be to "Reply All" to name that the idea was Dev's, check in with Taylor (the "no offense, but..." character) later to go deeper into why their comments were harmful, talk to other bystanders who remained silent, check in with other colleagues to ask whether they've had similar experiences, or speak with a manager or Human Resources.



5 strategies for intervening

If the microaggression does not directly target your identity or experience, you could:

1. Ask questions

- *Where do you think you learned that / who taught you that?*
- *Can I ask why that bothers you?*
- Ask for clarification, repeat the sentence back using more appropriate language to see if that more accurately and appropriately captures what they were trying to say.

2. Name what's happening / highlight assumptions

- *I recently learned that there are racist roots to that term/comment. Would you be open to me sending along some resources?*

3. Pause + share your feelings / disagree / express discomfort

- *I don't know everything about this subject, but I do know that that comment makes me feel _____. Can I circle back to you later to talk more about it?*
- *It's my experience that _____*
- *I disagree*

4. Rely on organizational values / policies

5. Share your own ongoing learning process

- *I remember when I was just learning about _____, and here are some things that helped me.*

4 things to remember about receiving an intervention

If a bystander is the one to call you in, remember:

1. Non-defensive - start with "thanks"

- for letting me know what I said wasn't ok
- for giving me a new way of looking at that
- next time I'll use more appropriate language
- I obviously need to learn more about that
- I hadn't considered it that way before
- I'll need some time to fully understand the impact that comment had. Is it ok if I take some time to think about what you've said and check back in with you if I have questions?

2. Commit to + pursue further learning



3. Don't rush to "fixing"

- As much as possible, stay present in these challenging (and sometimes traumatic) moments, and notice and name your bodily responses and feelings even if - or maybe especially when - you don't know what else to say. For more on somatic facilitation practices, explore the work of Tada Hozumi ([What it means to heal white supremacy: restoring the cultural nervous system, cultivating Hara](#), and more articles [here](#)) or the work of Resmaa Menakem ([website here](#), [podcast here](#)).

4. Use what you've learned to help others

- It can be part of your allyship to marginalized people to use your personal learning to advocate for both social and systemic change.

Remember: It's important to practice "both sides" of interventions