

Recognizing the nuances of microaggressions and the importance of words, actions and body language

Raising awareness of microaggressions in the workplace is an integral part of addressing unconscious bias and improving diversity, equity and inclusion. As HR and learning leaders develop strategies to tackle these complex issues, they have an opportunity to reinforce the message that there's nothing 'micro' about the impact of microaggressions.

A 2019 Deloitte inclusion survey of 3,000 full-time US professionals found that 64% of respondents said they either experienced and/or witnessed bias in the workplace within the last 12 months. And 83% of those professionals said the bias took the form of a microaggression — those everyday snubs and offensive comments, often from well-intentioned co-workers, that have been compared to death by a thousand cuts.



What are microaggressions?

Dr. Derald Wing Sue, a professor of counseling psychology at Columbia University and author of several books on microaggressions, describes microaggressions as slights, indignities, insults and put downs that people of color, women, LGBTQ individuals, and other marginalized groups experience in their daily interactions. Microaggressions may appear to be harmless or even a compliment, but they contain demeaning hidden messages, which often stem from unconscious biases.

As part of a comprehensive strategy to create a more diverse and inclusive workplace culture, microaggressions training for all employees, including remote workers and the C-Suite, can help individuals:

1. Recognize the different types of microaggressions

Whether verbal or nonverbal, microaggressions communicate hostile, negative or derogatory messages about someone's race, ethnicity, religion, gender, age, sexual orientation, disability or other characteristics. They reaffirm a stereotype or assumption that all members of a particular group are the same.

2. Understand the consequences of microaggressions

Whether intentional or not, hurtful comments in the workplace can affect people's mental and physical health, and make them feel judged, misunderstood, excluded, disrespected, vulnerable and unsafe. People who are targets of microaggressions often become disengaged at work, dissatisfied with their jobs and experience burnout. Microaggressions can also undermine relationships with co-workers and partners, and erode teamwork and productivity.

3. Respond constructively to microaggressions

How to respond to microaggressions depends on the situation and context. However, the general principle is to help the perpetrator understand how their comments or behavior make people feel, and not put them on the defensive. Being an ally and an active bystander are among the effective ways that individuals can show empathy and support for colleagues from marginalized or underrepresented groups.

4. Identify their own biases and cultural insensitivity

Creating a work environment in which people can be open to discuss unconscious biases and microaggressions – their own and those of others — and the need to increase cultural sensitivity is another positive step in addressing microaggressions. This includes encouraging employees to speak up, ask questions and raise concerns about the subtle and not-so-subtle comments and actions they may experience or witness.

TRALIAN INSIGHT

Helping employees gain a deeper understanding of microaggressions is part of the process of improving diversity, equity and inclusion in the workplace. Encouraging interaction among diverse groups and implementing ongoing training and education can heighten awareness of microaggressions and the messages they send, and better equip individuals to decide how to respond — whether they are a recipient, bystander or perpetrator.

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Microaggressions in the Workplace

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