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Whether intentional or unintentional, microaggressions communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults toward a person or group. *Photo: Adobe Stock*

# Microaggression

## Defusing the hidden drama in the workplace

by Janice Otremba

Ever walked into work, coffee in hand, feeling ready to conquer the world, only to be greeted with a “compliment” that feels more like a slap? Welcome to the world of microaggressions: those tiny, often unintentional, comments or actions that can deflate your balloon faster than you can say “Monday morning.”

Think of microaggressions as the stealthy underminers of the workplace, lurking in the shadows of casual conversation and seemingly benign interactions. We are about to shine a light on these sneaky little suckers, unpacking their subtlety and gearing up for a candid chat on how to kick them to the curb.

Buckle up – it is going to be a ride filled with humour, direct talk, and maybe a few home truths.

### Defining Microaggressions: More Than Just Small Talk

So, what exactly are microaggressions? Picture your colleague saying to you, “Wow, your English is so good!” despite knowing you were born and raised in the same city as them. Or perhaps,

during a meeting, someone constantly interrupts the youngest team member, subtly undermining their contributions. These are microaggressions – seemingly minor, often unintentional, comments or actions that communicate derogatory or negative prejudices.

Microaggressions are like invisible ink, often overlooked but leaving a lasting impression once revealed. They are brief and commonplace verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities.

Whether intentional or unintentional, they communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults toward a person or group, particularly those from marginalized communities. It is not just about what is said, but also what is implied – the subtle messages that say, “You do not belong,” “You are different,” “You are not normal,” or “You are not as good.”

The term “microaggression” was first coined in the 1970s by psychiatrist Dr. Chester M. Pierce, originally focusing on racial insults. Over time, the concept has broadened to include a wide range of marginalized groups, encompassing

gender, sexual orientation, religion, and disability, among others.

These seemingly innocuous comments or actions often stem from unconscious biases, societal stereotypes, or deeply ingrained prejudices. It is like a cultural script that has been playing in the background for so long that many are not even aware they are reciting it.

*Hidden Figures* (2016) is a film based on the true story of three brilliant African-American women at NASA – Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson – who were instrumental in launching astronaut John Glenn into orbit.

This film showcases a range of microaggressions faced by these women in the early 1960s, a time when both racial and gender discrimination were rampant. The microaggressions in the film include colleagues questioning the women’s mathematical abilities, being overlooked or ignored in meetings, and facing restrictions in the workplace, such as separate bathrooms and coffee pots for African-Americans. These examples reflect the more systemic and

institutionalized racism and sexism of the era.

The film does a compelling job of highlighting how these microaggressions, both subtle and overt, affected the characters' professional and personal lives. It is a powerful example of how such behaviours and attitudes, often normalized in a specific historical and cultural context, can have a profound impact on individuals and their opportunities in the workplace.

## Why It Is No Joke: The Real Impact of Microaggressions

Laughing off microaggressions as just jokes or oversensitivity fails to recognize their real impact. These seemingly small acts can compound over time, leading to a toxic work environment. They contribute to feelings of isolation, lower self-esteem, increased stress, and even physical health issues. It is a cumulative effect, where each microaggression adds another brick to an invisible wall that separates and silences.

### *Impact on the workplace –*

Microaggressions are like termites in the foundation of your workplace culture. They are small but can cause significant damage over time. They chip away at team dynamics, leaving cracks of distrust and discomfort. Imagine being on the receiving end of these subtle jabs day in and day out. It is exhausting and demoralizing, and can make the difference between loving your job and eyeing the exit sign.

Employee morale takes a hit, too. When team members feel undervalued or misunderstood because of microaggressions, their engagement and productivity plummet faster than a dropped phone. It is hard to focus on your work when you are busy bracing for the next backhanded compliment or insensitive joke.

### *Impact on mental health –*

Underestimating the impact of microaggressions on mental health is like ignoring a slow leak in a dam. It might not seem like much at first, but over time, the pressure builds up.

Employees who are frequently subjected to microaggressions can experience increased anxiety, depression, and a sense of helplessness. Their mental bandwidth is consumed by navigating these daily

slights, leaving less energy for creativity, problem solving, and collaboration.

### *Impact beyond the individual –*

Microaggressions do not just affect the individuals targeted; they send ripples throughout the entire workplace. They can erode team cohesion, create an environment of mistrust, and even affect customer relations.

When employees do not feel safe or valued, it shows in their work and interactions. It is like a chain reaction – what starts as a small slight can balloon into a widespread issue affecting the entire organization.

## Zero Tolerance: Building a Foundation of Unshakeable Respect

Alright, let us cut to the chase: understanding microaggressions is just the tip of the iceberg. We are diving deep into their world – no more snooze-worthy, checkbox-ticking workshops. We are bringing it to life with vibrant, interactive sessions that pack a punch, showcasing the stark reality of microaggressions. Picture role-play scenarios so on-point you will be doing double-takes thinking it is your office replayed. There is nothing hypothetical about these real-life scenarios.

Time to fling open the doors to diversity and inclusion. Politeness is great, but what we need is raw, unfiltered conversation. And guess what? A dash of humour is not just the sugar to help the medicine go down, it is our secret weapon in disarming the tough stuff.

Imagine a “no judgment zone” buzzing with genuine dialogue, where sharing and learning happen without the eye rolls or under-the-breath mutters. The following are opportunities to have messy and uncomfortable conversations to learn, inform, and be better humans – and better leaders:

- **Ironclad policies** – Crafting clear, enforceable policies is not just a step, it is the foundation for real change. We are setting boundaries that are crystal clear. No blurred lines, no excuses. This is not about playing favourites, it is about cultivating an environment where respect and

inclusivity are not just pretty words – they are our bread and butter.

- **Leaders steer the ship of change** – Attention leaders: The spotlight is on you, and it is your turn to lead the dance. Your approach to microaggressions sets the stage for everyone else. Here is your golden ticket to show what real inclusivity looks like – not just in theory, but in action. Demonstrate that embracing diversity is part of our everyday reality.
- **Feedback turns insights into action** – Let us embrace feedback like it is our morning coffee: essential and energizing. In the realm of microaggressions, open, constructive feedback is our lifeline. Champion a culture where feedback is not just welcomed, it is eagerly sought. It is about being transparent, agile, and always ready to grow. After all, isn't the workplace the best place for real-time learning and evolving?
- **Every player counts** – This is a team sport. Creating an inclusive environment is everyone's game. Every word you speak – every action you take – weaves into the fabric of our workplace culture. It is time to be intentional, empathetic, and a driving force for positive change. Own your role, step up to the plate, and make every interaction count. Because together, we are not just ticking boxes, we are making waves.

Addressing microaggressions in the workplace is not just about avoiding awkwardness or being politically correct. It is about creating a space where everyone feels valued, respected, and included. It is about building a culture that celebrates diversity, encourages open dialogue, and fosters a sense of belonging. And that, my friends, is a goal worth pursuing.

So, let us roll up our sleeves and get to work. After all, those microaggressions are not going to kick themselves to the curb.



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