



# Microaggressions at Work

How subtle acts of exclusion  
can poison your workplace culture

A comprehensive guide for Canadian employers



## An Example of a Workplace Interaction



### One co-worker to another:

"I love your hair! It kind of does its own thing, right? Like, 'who cares about business dress code?' That is so awesome. I wish I could get away with a style like that. Can I touch it?"

### An effusive compliment from one employee to another. Right?

Let's critique this piece of chatter. In just a few sentences, the speaker:

- Draws attention to a personal characteristic of a co-worker
- Conveys a high comfort level with making an aesthetic pronouncement about another person
- Suggests the co-worker's hair is aberrant and even contrary to business environment norms
- Implies that the co-worker is "getting away" with something that other employees cannot
- Places a "stamp of approval" on the person's hair, as though giving permission for deviation from assumed norms
- Violates boundaries by asking to touch the person's hair, thereby suggesting it is an exhibit or spectacle open to the public.

As we can see, the speaker has potentially used several **microaggressions**.

Of course, this is a hypothetical interaction between two co-workers. Depending on the relationship between them, the level of discomfort experienced by the employee whose hair was spotlighted may range from severe to moderate to almost non-existent. The speaker may be well-intentioned and genuinely admiring. The two may be friends, justifying some level of familiarity. Perhaps they have a daily banter about fashion, and they take turns critiquing each other. These contextual details are important to note — because they are often used to suggest that such conversations never have a negative valence. In other words, the fact that this conversation could plausibly occur between two people without one of them finding it uncomfortable is often used to bolster the argument that microaggressions do not happen in the workplace. In reality, though, **microaggressions occur often**. That's why it's important for us to be sensitive to how and why they occur and be mindful of our conversations and behaviours.

# What is a microaggression?

The term **microaggression** was coined in 1970 by Chester M. Pierce, a psychiatrist at Harvard University, to describe instances he regularly witnessed of non-Black Americans insulting or being dismissive of Black Americans. Microaggressions occur during commonplace verbal exchanges where one person communicates — intentionally or not — hostile or derogatory attitudes toward a person in a culturally or socially marginalized group. Such persons may include racialized people, LGBTQ2+ people, women, seniors, and those who have disabilities or live in poverty. In such an exchange, the speaker may be unaware they have used a microaggression, especially in complex situations where multiple interpretations are possible. This complexity, in turn, contributes to a tendency among marginalized people to shrug off microaggressions, assume good intentions on the part of the speaker, and carry on without addressing the underlying prejudices and biases that may exist.

## Why “micro”?

The concept of microaggressions has evolved. Since Pierce first proposed the term, other scholars have built upon it. While some suggest that “micro” refers to an insult or slight against one individual vs. against an entire group<sup>1</sup>, most researchers maintain that the prefix “micro” refers to the size and level of detectability of an insult or slight. Not only is a microaggression subtle and easy to deny, **both the observers and the person who delivers a microaggression are often oblivious to it**. In contrast, a macroaggression is an overt act that is intentional and unambiguous to all parties involved.

“Microaggression definition: Brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership.”

Derald Wing Sue, psychologist

Despite the word “micro,” they are not small or insignificant, as evidenced by the root word “aggression.” This word often deters people from owning up to committing microaggressions — no one wants to be thought of as aggressive. For that reason, some scholars<sup>2</sup> propose using the term “**subtle acts of exclusion**” in place of microaggressions. Derald Wing Sue<sup>3 4</sup> divides microaggressions into subcategories:

- **Microassaults** are the most overt and unambiguous microaggressions and are often delivered with the intention to hurt. Behaviours include name-calling, avoidance and purposeful discrimination.
- **Microinsults** are more subtle but harmful nonetheless. They include insensitive communications that demean someone’s identity and may consist of back-handed compliments that hide negative messages. They often convey assumptions—for example, about a person’s criminal status. They are not always intentional; they may be subconscious.
- **Microinvalidations** are behaviours or statements that deny or nullify someone’s lived experience of being marginalized. For example, a person might insist that racism or sexism is no longer a societal problem and that an individual’s lived experience is imaginary or exaggerated.



There are very few African American men in this country who haven't had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a department store. That includes me.

Barack Obama, former U.S. President

Microaggressions, even when not intended, are often rooted in prejudice or bias. For example, even though a person of a dominant group may have learned that racism is wrong, they may nevertheless have an unconscious sense of superiority or a sense that racialized groups are “other” and therefore to be avoided. Men may understand objectively that the sexes are equal yet feel instinctively superior based on physical strength or size and the accolades these characteristics are accorded in society. Heterosexual people may believe in and promote equality for LGBTQ2+ people but feel discomfort with various types of gender expression.

Part of this thinking is hardwired into us. As Jennifer L. Eberhardt, PhD, writes, “**bias is not an affliction that can be cured or banished. It’s a human condition that we have to understand and deal with.**”<sup>5</sup> <sup>6</sup> Our brains have evolved to make snap judgments about what is good or bad, safe or unsafe, “them” or “us.” Instinctively we gravitate to what is familiar and known; conversely, we may avoid the unfamiliar. Even within groups, this is the case; for example, the immediate family takes precedence over distant relations, who have priority over strangers.

In our globalized world, overt racism, sexism and other prejudices are officially unacceptable — which unquestionably marks progress — but bias still finds expression in aversive or avoidant behaviour. Where outright violence and oppression were once rampant, prejudice expresses itself more subtly now — in the form of microaggressions.



# Types of microaggressions

Since the term **microaggression** was first introduced, social scientists have proposed several ways of categorizing them. Originally postulated as a theory of racism, “microaggression” later expanded to cover not just race but gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, class, age and other identity groups.

Psychologist Derald Wing Sue enumerated **eight microaggression themes**.

## Examples:

| Theme                      | Explanation                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Alien in Own Land          | “Where are you from? I don’t hear an accent.”<br>Reflects an assumption that someone is a foreigner in their own country.                                                                                                      |
| Invisibility               | Many automatically focus on Black/White conflict without considering Indigenous or Asian people when thinking about racism.<br>Assumes that bias doesn’t affect certain identity groups, which are then barred from discourse. |
| Exoticization              | Describes women (usually, but sometimes men) as submissive, sassy, sexy, obedient, etc., based on identity characteristics and historical or fictional narratives.                                                             |
| Denial of Difference       | Assumes homogeneity within an identity group and that all people of that group look or behave the same way.                                                                                                                    |
| Ascription of Intelligence | Assumes intelligence levels based on racial characteristics — e.g., “Asians are great at math.”                                                                                                                                |
| Denial of Racial Reality   | Denies the lived experience of persons who say they have been subject to discrimination — e.g., “There’s no racism in Canada.”                                                                                                 |
| Second-class Citizenship   | Gives lower priority to certain identity groups (e.g., when a man and a woman enter a car dealership, the man gets served first).                                                                                              |
| Pathologizing              | Singles out cultural characteristics or behaviours as problematic (e.g., insisting that women who wear the hijab are forced to do so by men).                                                                                  |

# Microaggressions in the workplace

It's critical to understand the current thinking on microaggressions — how they are (or should be) defined, how they may cause harm, how and why they should be called out, and what critics have to say about them. This last point is crucial because organizations and HR professionals need to make decisions about employee relations. If an accusation of committing a microaggression is levelled, they will need to understand it from all sides.

Microaggressions are constant reminders that you don't belong, that you are less than, that you are not worthy of the same respect that White people are afforded.

Ijeoma Oluo (author, *So You Want to Talk About Race*)

## Controversy

This research on microaggressions is not without controversy. The root word “aggression” suggests hostility, violence, belligerence and antagonism. Others believe that includes behaviour that goes beyond the most commonly known examples of microaggressions. An example is that name-calling or purposefully discriminatory actions are sometimes categorized as microaggressions but should more rightfully be called “aggressions,” as they are overt and intentional.

## Subjectivity

Microaggression theory has been criticized for its reliance on subjective evidence. One person may be unaware they are sending a negative message to the other. This reality places the onus on the recipient to assess behaviours and communications for possible negative meanings and determine whether they warrant calling out. In cases where the recipient is also unaware of a message's negative connotations, the situation can be even more complicated, with observers and other parties weighing in on the message content and the intention behind it. This puts the recipient in an uncomfortable position — needing to make a judgment call to address or ignore a possible microaggression, which may put their credibility at stake. For this reason, **it is vital to have a shared workplace understanding of what constitutes a microaggression and how to react to it.**

Some commentators have argued that the microaggression concept is not robust enough to withstand scrutiny. They point to the potential for one employee to accuse another of committing a microaggression, only to be accused of imagining or exaggerating it. On the flip side, they argue that an accused employee may end up being disciplined or terminated for something trivial. These are the flagship arguments of critics, and they are not wholly without merit, as any situation that relies upon subjective reports creates an opportunity for abuse.

The subjective nature of microaggressions demands that they be defined in a way that is understandable and practical for employees, with the support of training or educational materials. Moreover, the response to an accusation must involve dialogue with all parties. This approach does not diminish the gravity of an accusation; instead, it allows everyone to gain clarity, discuss whether bias or prejudice is an issue, and lay out the next steps.

One of the most important ways to manage our mental health in the face of racism is to make sure that we have supportive people to help us in processing our experiences.<sup>7</sup>

Dr. Joy Bradford, psychologist

## Misunderstandings

Like any framework for understanding the world, the theory of microaggressions is open to being misunderstood — innocently and otherwise, as in the case of those who deliberately misrepresent it. Thus it becomes critical to regard microaggressions through a subjective lens, acknowledging that people are individuals with different sensitivities. What one person finds microaggressive, another might not. And while organizations should attempt to establish a shared understanding of what healthy communication looks like, they need to make space for nuance and interpretation — and facilitate conversations about meaning.

People who engage in microaggressions are ordinary folks who experience themselves as good, moral, decent individuals. Microaggressions occur because they are outside the level of conscious awareness of the perpetrator.<sup>8</sup>

Derald Wing Sue, psychologist

In a famous example of context dependence, a newsletter published at Oxford University<sup>9</sup> listed “not making eye contact or speaking directly to people” as a “racial micro-aggression.” This newsletter was then obliged to retract the statement when a controversy erupted, summed up in a tweet by David M. Davis: “One sign of autism is avoiding eye contact. How dare Oxford be so insensitive.”

Another concern worth recognizing is the potential for “mind-reading” — our capacity to extrapolate what someone is thinking based on their conversation and body language. On the one hand, mind-reading is a skill. We’ve all been urged at some point to “read the room” — i.e., generate an assumption about what others are thinking or feeling based on verbal and nonverbal evidence at hand. Without a doubt, it’s useful to be able to do this. On the other hand, cognitive behavioural therapists warn against the potential for cognitive distortion<sup>10</sup> — **assuming someone thinks or feels something about you personally when, in reality, there are other, unknown factors at play.**

The flip side of this risk is that people may avoid calling out genuine microaggressions for fear that their claims will be discounted or trivialized. Here again, there is a role for HR to play in creating a hospitable environment for employees to bring concerns forward and explore them.

Inevitably, organizations that implement guidelines for addressing microaggressions will need to field questions from employees. This guide tackles some misconceptions about microaggressions and provides practical information about situations in which they occur so we can work to avoid them.



When a house is on fire, the fire truck doesn't come and hose water on all the houses on the street saying, 'All houses matter.' They've come to help the fire that's burning.<sup>11</sup>

Carolyn Helsel (author, *Preaching About Racism: A Guide for Faith Leaders*),  
on why "all lives matter" is a microaggression

## Microaggressions: a closer look

Let's take a closer look at some specific microaggressions and how to respond to them.

"I don't see colour. I don't see race."

**Interpretation:** This statement is usually well-intentioned. Some people attribute it to Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech, but it is a distortion. King dreamed that his children would not be judged by the colour of their skin, but he did not wish for their colour to be invisible.

**Problematic because:** When you claim not to see colour or race, you **deny a crucial identity marker**. Furthermore, the notion of not seeing colour disavows the privilege and power of the dominant racial group, thus creating diminishing feelings of bias, prejudice, and racism experienced by people of colour.

**Instead:** Acknowledge differences and their relevance to the bias and systemic inequities that exist. We should see, value and celebrate diversity.

"Every person can succeed if they work hard enough."

**Interpretation:** This statement reflects a belief in a meritocratic system that rewards people for their efforts, assuming they all have the same opportunities. It is often made by people who themselves have benefited from opportunities and have not faced barriers.

**Problematic because:** The **claim of meritocracy** is problematic because it implies a level playing field, when research tells us that there are disparate outcomes for racialized and marginalized groups.

The statement that all a person must do is "work hard enough" suggests that laziness is the reason for these different outcomes when we know there are critical systemic factors.

For example, many people with disabilities are unemployed or underemployed, although highly skilled and capable.

**Instead:** Point out the barriers that exist for many individuals and marginalized groups and suggest ways to overcome them. For example, a person with a disability could have a modified work schedule or workstation.



"You're gay? I have a gay friend you should meet!"

**Interpretation:** The sentiment behind these words is friendly, and there may be a genuine interest and desire to connect on the part of the speaker. The mistake lies in suggesting that one LGBTQ2+ person will automatically be attracted to another on the basis of that orientation.

**Problematic because:** This statement **assumes all LGBTQ2+ persons are the same** and that one gay person will automatically be attracted to another. It suggests a universal experience of LGBTQ2+ when it is actually an umbrella category for a variety of people with diverse experiences.

Think about it — if someone told you they are heterosexual, you wouldn't automatically try to hook them up with any random person who was also heterosexual.

**Instead:** If you know someone that you'd like them to meet, ask yourself if it's because they're both gay or if it's because you think they'll get along well. Of course, it should be the latter!

"Do you wish you didn't have to wear a hijab? I bet your hair is really cute."

**Interpretation:** While the person who asks this question may indeed be curious and interested, they are being insensitive by suggesting that the hijab wearer does not fit in.

**Problematic because:** This question assumes the hijab wearer is longing to reveal her hair. Not only does it assume a lack of choice, it also **assumes shared aesthetic values**, and it implies the hijab wearer is unattractive by Western standards.

This question also trivializes the choice to wear a hijab, which reflects a woman's choice, beliefs and morals, and her commitment to Islam.

**Instead:** It's fine to ask curious questions of close friends if you have a connection with them. It's nosy to ask them of co-workers who are just acquaintances. Don't make assumptions about Muslim women; if they want to tell you about their practices, they will.

"You speak so clearly. You don't sound like a Black person."

**Interpretation:** There is no context in which this comment is acceptable, yet it is common. Congratulating a Black person for being articulate implies that facility with language is unique to White people, which is not true.

**Problematic because:** This statement has several implications — that there is a **single acceptable way to speak**; that it's an accomplishment to speak in the style of the dominant culture; and that Black people have a substandard way of expressing themselves.

There are variants of this comment (e.g., "you're so articulate!"). Sometimes the second sentence in this statement isn't included, but the insinuation is clear.

This comment is incredibly insulting to make toward anyone.

**Instead:** If an individual is articulate, by all means, let them know, but be specific about the context (e.g., "That was a great presentation!") and do not imply they have achieved their language skill despite their race or background.



### Job posting: Wanted: recent college grads or digital natives

**Interpretation:** It's common for companies to strive for alignment among team members, whether that applies to values or identity characteristics. But this needs to be paired with the aim of achieving diversity.

**Problematic because:** Ageist hiring practices are illegal, but they're still rampant. Labels like "recent college grad" and "digital native" send a message that **older workers aren't welcome**. The term "cultural fit" can also be problematic if it signals that diverse candidates are not welcome.

Imagine specifying that all hires should be "straight" or "white." In today's world, that would be unacceptable. Likewise, we shouldn't tolerate codewords signifying "youth" either.

**Instead:** A job posting should state what the candidate requires to perform the occupation. This includes skills, experience and knowledge. A diverse workforce is one with a range of ages.

### "I'm not racist. I have Black friends."

**Interpretation:** This is a defensive statement; it seeks to deny racism exists, with the rationalization being that the person making the statement has no personal involvement in racist acts. However, if they are not racialized, they likely benefit from being part of the dominant group.

**Problematic because:** **Denial of individual racism** is a knee-jerk reaction to the uncomfortable fact of racism in our society. It is oversimplistic to say that having Black friends makes a person immune to bias, particularly if they benefit from systemic inequity.

This often manifests in denial of "white privilege" as a systemic reality based on an individual's perceived lack of privilege. These conversations can quickly become defensive.

**Instead:** It's important for people to ask themselves uncomfortable questions about their position in society and whether they benefit from being part of the dominant culture. This is not meant to be punitive—it's an opportunity to explore the inequities in our society and think about how to address them.

### "Don't worry if you can't afford it. You can just pay me back later."

**Interpretation:** This type of generosity may be well-intentioned, especially if the person who makes the offer genuinely wants to enjoy the other person's company. But it's insensitive to the other person's financial situation.

**Problematic because:** If someone tells you they can't afford dinner or a coffee, they're telling you something that **makes them feel vulnerable**. It's patronizing to insist on paying their share, and it takes their choice away.

This "casual generosity" **reflects ease with money** that the other person does not enjoy. It may not be so easy for them to "just pay you back later." And it may be embarrassing for them to say so.

**Instead:** If someone says they can't afford something and you want to pay for them, you can do so, but don't embarrass them and don't attach strings.

"You don't look like a guy to me, so it's hard for me to remember your pronouns. So just ignore it when I say 'she.'"

**Interpretation:** Saying you can't remember your co-worker's pronouns is a poor excuse, especially when your statement indicates you have no intention of trying to remember. And there's no need to make personal comments about a person's appearance.

**Problematic because:** Ignoring a transgender person's preferred pronouns indicates a **lack of respect for their declared identity**. Personal comments about appearance are unwelcome.

While it can be challenging to adjust to using new pronouns, it's important to make the effort if a person has recently declared transgender status.

Commenting that they don't "look like" their declared gender reinforces how difficult it is to assert a non-binary identity in a heteronormative world.

**Instead:** If it's difficult to get used to new pronouns and you accidentally slip up, apologize and move on.

Do not persistently use the wrong pronouns; this is called misgendering.

If you observe others refusing to use preferred pronouns, call them out.

Consider making it common practice to ask everyone how they'd like to be addressed when you first meet them.

"You Asians are all so great at math!"

**Interpretation:** This is framed as a compliment, but it is not one. It's a way of "othering" Asians and positioning them as a competitive threat to other races. Even if uttered innocently, it belies an ignorance of intelligence research.

**Problematic because:** Ascribing intelligence to a racial group is problematic because it's a **denial of individuality**. Within any identity group, there is a variety and diversity of skills and abilities.

To suggest that any skill is the domain of one particular group is a vast oversimplification. It also implies that other racial groups are less intelligent or skilled.

These types of stereotypes underpin some of the worst historical examples of racism.

**Instead:** Avoid making generalizations about entire identity groups. For example, if you want to compliment someone on their math skills, compliment them as an individual, and be specific about why you think they're good at math.



# Acknowledging the impact of microaggressions

## Impact on recipients of microaggressions

Microaggressions have the potential to impact people emotionally, psychologically and physiologically. **For individuals who are subject to subtle slights and insults, this impact is cumulative.** It can be exhausting to hear similar negative comments repeated over and over.

"You don't have an accent, but you look so exotic. Where are you from?"

"I'm Canadian."

"No, where are you really from?"

"Canada."

"Well then, where are your parents from?"

For some people, microaggressions may be mildly irritating. For other people, they are a daily reminder that the dominant culture considers them exotic, trivializes them, or excludes them altogether. Even more fatiguing is the ongoing need to make judgment calls about whether a comment or behaviour actually is a microaggression. Many comments are framed as humour and are expressed in a friendly tone of voice.

"How's our 'diversity hire' doing today? Keep up the good work!"

Not only is it tiresome to maintain collegial relationships with people who persistently make insensitive comments, it strains an individual's ability to maintain a positive self-concept. If a stereotype is repeated in the workplace, it can begin to seem true, which can undermine a person's self-belief and contribute to an achievement gap.<sup>12</sup> It can also create feelings of anxiety and seriously impact mental health and well-being.

"Your name is too hard to pronounce. So, I'm just going to call you Fred — it'll be easier for both of us."

Studies show that People of Colour who experience large numbers of racial microaggressions also experience many mental health issues,<sup>13</sup> including depression, fatigue and even physical pain. Effects are both short-term (feeling conflict over whether and how to respond) and long-term (feeling hopeless or powerless). Similar distress has been proven among other marginalized groups, including women, LGBTQ2+ people, and people with disabilities.<sup>14</sup> **Where identity markers overlap intersectionally, stress increases.** For example, Black LGBTQ2+ people have elevated suicide and depression risks relative to Black people who are heterosexual.<sup>15</sup>



## Impact on people who commit microaggressions

For people who commit microaggressions, intentional or not, there are also negative impacts. For example, it's hard to imagine that people who deliver repeated slights and insults would be oblivious forever to the way those communications are received.

- Even if the slights are ignored or minimized, the work environment may still be chilly. It's hard to feel collegial toward people who commit microaggressions. It's uncomfortable pretending everything is okay when it's not — and this may become apparent to those who commit microaggressions.
- If the slights are met head-on and there's a confrontation, the work environment can become overtly hostile. People who use microaggressions may refuse to recognize that they've done so. Denial can happen even if they acknowledge how their communications or behaviours were received, they may try to justify their behaviour because the microaggressions were unintentional. If they do not have a proper understanding of microaggressions, they may not realize that even unintentional ones impact others.

...everyone commits microaggressions ... OWN UP TO IT!

**Kevin L. Nadal, psychologist and professor  
at John Jay College of Criminal Justice**

Another unfortunate impact can arise when employees lack training in recognizing and addressing microaggressions. This takes the form of fear among employees that they are being policed or that they will be punished if they don't self-police. Without guidance, they may become fearful of associating with people in other identity groups. These fears may be unfounded, as a healthy work environment will have mechanisms to ensure that these impacts don't occur. Only in a negative organizational culture will outright hostility between co-workers be allowed to fester.

On the other hand, in a positive workplace culture, there will be strategies to counteract the possibility of these impacts. These may include:

- Providing training and resources to create an understanding of microaggressions
- Having trained HR staff who can navigate incidents involving microaggressions
- Fostering a community where people are encouraged to work through differences to reach an understanding
- Responding appropriately when a reported grievance continues without improvement
- Valuing diversity in all respects, including identity characteristics, viewpoints, and communication styles — enabling everyone to be heard

Some researchers have expressed concern that the process of addressing a workplace microaggression may cause more trauma for all parties than was caused by the microaggression itself. But, again, this will only be true in a work environment where there is a lack of understanding about microaggressions.



Lastly, some thinkers worry that a workplace where people are encouraged to report microaggressions will create an onslaught of accusations, some of which will be so trivial as to draw attention away from genuine instances of racism, exclusion, and oppression. Once again, this points to the quality of training and level of awareness in the work environment and how healthy the organizational culture is. Many organizations lack an appropriate reporting mechanism or process for reporting bad behaviour. Further, many employees don't report microaggressions for fear of retaliation.

The goal of enabling people to report microaggressions should never be to stir up conflict where none exists. Rather, it is to foster everyone's awareness of how we should relate to each other in an inclusive, positive way.

## Impact on bystanders of microaggressions

For employees who witness microaggressions between colleagues, there is often a dilemma. Should they speak out about an incident that is by definition minor and not called out? Should they lend their support to a colleague who calls out a microaggression even when there is no ill intention behind it? What responsibility do they bear to be aware of microaggressions among colleagues?

“We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people.”

Martin Luther King Jr.

Bystanders — those who witness microaggressions but do not themselves commit them and remain neutral — may experience stress because they recognize the wrongness of what they see occurring but, given the “micro” nature of the infractions, do not know whether they should react. The journey from bystander to ally — a person who takes action — may involve some painful soul-searching. Even if the individual decides to flip the switch from being passive to taking action, they may not know what to do to help, which may result in a kind of paralysis.

In the next section, we offer guidance for organizations to lead all team members toward a new reality where microaggressions are mitigated and/or eradicated.

## How should individuals respond to microaggressions?

Kevin L. Nadal, in *A Guide to Responding to Microaggressions*,<sup>16</sup> notes that people who are targeted by microaggressions, as well as bystanders, feel a “Catch-22” sensation,<sup>17</sup> in that regardless of how they respond (ignoring or confronting), there may be a negative outcome. Nadal recommends a structured response for mitigating this. It begins with considering the following:

### 1. Did a microaggression really occur?

Some microaggressions are blatant. Others are subtle, which may cause people to question whether they actually happened. If a person isn't sure, it may be helpful to ask witnesses. If no one witnessed the incident, the person can describe it to a friend and get feedback on whether it was a true microaggression.

## 2. Should I respond to this microaggression?

Nadal recommends a five-question checklist<sup>18</sup> to determine the next steps:

1. If I respond, could my physical safety be in danger?
2. If I respond, will the person become defensive and will this lead to an argument?
3. If I respond, how will this affect my relationship with this person?
4. If I don't respond, will I regret not saying something?
5. If I don't respond, does that convey acceptance of the behaviour or statement?

## 3. How should I respond to this microaggression?

According to Nadal, responses take multiple forms:

- Passive-aggressive (target makes a joke, rolls eyes, tells someone else but doesn't confront the aggressor)
- Anger (yelling at the aggressor, releasing frustration)
- Assertive (calmly telling the aggressor how they feel, educating the aggressor, using "I" statements to describe the impact, and then seeking support—whether it be HR assistance to file a report, emotional support from friends, or mental health support from a professional)



## Next steps for HR teams & management

Organizations have the power to put an end to workplace microaggressions. Indeed, they have both a legal and ethical responsibility to do so. If left unchecked, conflicts can escalate, create a toxic workplace and expose legal liability for employers who don't address concerns about discrimination.

### What can organizations do?

- **Create or update policies and procedures.** This process will take commitment and organizational capacity. It's a long-term journey, not a short-term fix. Create channels whereby employees can file grievances. Make sure reporting procedures are clear and easy to follow, as well as non-threatening and non-punitive.
- **Define the core values of the organization.** How do these dovetail with your stance on microaggressions? If you're not sure, devote some time to working this out. This may entail difficult discussions with leadership. Create, revamp, or restate your position on diversity and inclusion. It should be visible on your website, social media channels, hiring materials, and internal employee communications.
- **Define desired outcomes.** What will it look like when the organization has policies and procedures in place? Map it out and assign accountabilities to make it happen. Do it gradually, not all at once. Be prepared to iterate.
- **Empower employees to tell their stories,** but don't put the onus on them to drive the organization's policies. That's the job of leadership. Instead, provide opportunities to hear what employees have to say, particularly if they've historically been underrepresented. Encourage multiple perspectives and make space for people to contribute their ideas.
- **Implement anti-bias/anti-oppression training.** If a company has the means, it can bring in third-party expertise; if not, online resources are available.
- **Educate yourself and your teams.** There are many sources of information on microaggressions, and there is a vibrant debate on their implications and how they should be managed. Explore **reliable sources** and find out more. Create employee toolkits that include pertinent, helpful information and resources for all levels of the organization. Check in regularly with team members.
- **Incorporate "micro-inclusions."** For example, create an expectation that if two employees are in a meeting and a third one joins, the first two should welcome the third with a bridging statement such as: "We were just going over XYZ."
- **Acknowledge and take responsibility.** Everyone commits microaggressions. Not only do they occur between dominant and marginalized groups, they also occur within both dominant and marginalized groups. But just the fact that this behaviour is common doesn't make it trivial. The fact that we as humans are susceptible to conflict over shared meaning doesn't remove our responsibility. We have the responsibility to communicate more effectively.
- **Check your biases.** We all have biases. It's one of the things that makes us human. But, we're not powerless against them. Become more aware of how you think, why you think that way, and how your experiences have shaped your thinking. Be open to new perspectives. Listen to others.
- **Don't be a bystander.** If you observe inappropriate or offensive behaviour or actions, unfairness or discrimination, question it and take action to stop it.

## Thank you

Thank you for having the courage and determination to do the work involved in eliminating microaggressions and fighting for equality — especially in the workplace.

## References

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## About Parris Consulting

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