HR NEWS

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DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

How Leaders Can Identify Microaggressions at Work and Shut Them Down

By Heather R. Younger

We all want to feel safe at work—emotionally, physically, and mentally. The reality for members of marginalized groups in the workforce, however, is that feeling included and believing their voices matter are often ongoing battles.

A major problem is that many organizational leaders and colleagues can be blissfully unaware of how they contribute to excluding and silencing coworkers. To correct this and evolve into caring and effective leaders, managers need to identify microaggressions and understand the negative impact thoughtless comments and actions have.

As a biracial person who presents as a Black woman, I have experienced the sting of microaggressions firsthand. I've ignored many incidents while chalking them up to the other person's ignorance. My willingness to let an untoward comment or rude action roll off my back does not extend to microaggressions directed at others. Consider this article part of my commitment to speaking up.

Defining Microaggressions

Briefly, microaggressions are insults and slights that do not always rise to the level of openly derogatory comments or plainly obvious indignities. A microaggression can be verbal, behavioral or environmental. It can also be intentional or unintentional. For instance, many people lack the self-awareness required to realize how inappropriate it is for a non-Black person to touch a Black person's hair—or even ask to do so.

In any form, a microaggression communicates hostility toward, negative feelings about or lack of respect for an individual or group based on the target's racial, gender, sexual or religious identity or social and economic status. Clear evidence for what constitutes a microaggression comes from a survey conducted through the Gallup Center on Black Voices during the summer of 2020. The poll revealed that 32 percent of Black adults in the United States felt some people had acted as if they were better than

them. Another textbook microaggression involves describing a Black person as "articulate" or "well-spoken" with some degree of surprise.

In truth, microaggressions have affected everyone at some point in their lives. Problems range from telling a thin person they should eat more to denouncing something as "so gay." Sadly, incidents such as these are increasingly common in every workplace.

Move From Hurt to Enlightenment

Without realizing it, many leaders allow those who look to them for safety and guidance to feel unsafe because of microaggressions. When people make comments about someone's health issues, language differences or cultural background, managers are responsible for immediately shutting that down. Doing nothing makes the leader complicit in the microaggressions and a major contributor to a toxic work culture.

In truth, we all need to work together to shut down inappropriate behavior and hurtful language. It is no longer acceptable to claim that ignorance of causing offense always equals innocence.

Even when someone is unaware of the harm they caused a colleague, what the person did was wrong and needs to be dealt with. Unwittingly causing distress to another can only be treated as a slip-up one time. After the first incident, the individual who committed the microaggression assumes a personal responsibility for learning from the experience and ensuring they do not repeat the same mistake.

Steps to Stop Microaggressions

As general advice, it is important to not act aggressively when calling out and attempting to correct a microaggression. First, you do not want to give any credence to inaccurate stereotypes about angry Black women, or whichever dismissive caricature applies.

Second, it is essential to model the respect toward others that is the goal of eliminating microaggressions.

Concrete steps anyone can take to identify and prevent microaggressions are to

■ Calmly ask the person who committed the microaggression why they said what they said or did what they did. People often make inaccurate assumptions based upon their past consumption of bad information. Seek to understand the other person's way of thinking.

■ Show the individual you are actively listening to what they say by leaning in, shaking your head and repeating back what you hear to make sure you have understood what they said.

■ Meet the other person where they are. Let them know where you can see their thinking and, if applicable, where you agree with them.

■ After the other person has explained themselves, ask permission to share why you think what they said or did is not accurate or appropriate. Use as much factual and historical information as possible. Emphasize that you would also defend the person to whom you are speaking if they were the target of a microaggression.

■ If you are calling out a microaggression against someone other than yourself, consider ending the conversation with a question like, "Can you see now how what you said offended that individual?"

Having this kind of conversation will be easier at some times than at others. It depends on whether emotions come out. Either way, it is important to let the person who committed the microaggression know why you cannot accept that type of treatment for yourself or someone else.

Ending Microaggressions Promotes Employee Retention

Creating a safe work environment is imperative if leaders want employees to stay with the organization, innovate, go above and beyond for the team, and exceed customer expectations. If employees don't feel safe, they will not feel loyal or committed to the team and seeing the organization succeed. Acknowledging microaggressions and protecting employees from attacks on who they are is a major move toward making the workplace safe for everyone.

Addressing microaggressions is a key first step along the path of creating an environment that allows opinions and ideas to be heard in a nonthreatening way. When leaders help members of their team feel safe, it frees up employees to be their best, unique selves.

Heather R. Younger is the author of The Art of Caring Leadership *and founder of the employee engagement and leadership development consulting firm Employee Fanatix. As a speaker, adjunct professor of organizational leadership, trainer and facilitator, Younger has earned a reputation as "The Employee Whisperer."* —N