

1.6.12: Bias in the Workplace

Learning Objectives

- Discuss the impact bias might have on communication in the workplace



When thinking about diversity in the workplace, chances are, most individuals tend to see themselves as good-intentioned, egalitarian, and fair-minded people. They certainly do not go out of their way to denigrate others. However, believing yourself to be “good” simply because you’re not actively engaging in hateful behavior is an overly simplistic and, ultimately, unaware viewpoint because everyone has unconscious bias of some kind. The steps individuals take (or don’t take!) to recognize and combat these unconscious biases has a direct impact on the workplace and everyday life.

It is important to be aware of how biases can affect individuals’ behavior. While there are laws and regulations designed to protect against explicit and extreme bias (e.g., not hiring someone because of their race, gender, ability, or age), there are also instances when seemingly “small” things individuals say or do in the workplace can leave a long-lasting impression in employees’ minds.

Such “small” things are known as microaggressions or microinvalidations: daily forms of taken-for-granted bias and discrimination that have a real effect on people’s lives. The work of anti-racism and anti-discrimination is the ongoing struggle to recognize and respond to this situation.

- Microaggressions are brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership.
- Microinvalidations are characterized by communications or environmental cues that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of certain groups.

✓ Watch this

Watch this video to see some examples of everyday microaggressions and microinvalidations. This video comes from Derald Wing Sue, Professor of Psychology and Education at Columbia University, and his book titled *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender and Sexual Orientation*.



A YouTube element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: pb.libretexts.org/bcsfm/?p=614

This video illustrates examples of microaggressions that real people have experienced. After watching this video, you may have realized you have experienced one or more of these examples. These small slights aren't just "in your head," and it can feel like a relief that there is a term for this experience. Microaggressions are, by nature, hurtful and boundary-crossing. The statements and nonverbal communication from the video make an assumption about the history, identity, body, or community of the person holding the sign. A microaggression might also be distressing to another person in the room who may be overhearing the remark.

If you are the target of, or observe, a microaggression, you are not responsible for solving the problem unless you wish to take on that responsibility. But actions you might take to help management and other employees take responsibility could include:

- Having a private conversation with a friend, team lead, or other manager about how to bring a problematic or hurtful dynamic up with the individual expressing the microaggression.
- Describing to your superior what happened and asking to talk about it at a meeting or in a memo.
- If you are a bystander, you might talk to the team lead or manager. You might also take the person who committed the microaggression aside privately and share your perspective on what you saw and heard. Ask them how what they wanted to say could have been conveyed differently and more effectively. Encourage them to apologize if it is appropriate.

Our differences from each other are important and worth addressing because they allow us to deepen our conversations and share perspectives that may vary according to our national, racial, gender, or class identity. Very often, a microaggression is seen by the perpetrator as a compliment, a statement about someone not in the room, or as an expression of desire to be more familiar than the actual relationship with the person would support. Most importantly, a microaggression, because it reflects a biased attitude towards a whole group, may make it more difficult for members of that group to learn, be in the classroom space, or speak their minds. Reducing or eliminating microaggressions, and responding appropriately when one occurs, is everyone's responsibility, and we can do it while still preserving academic freedom and insisting on everyone's right to speak openly and frankly. On the other hand, we shouldn't be afraid to talk to each other, and even prior to friendship, we want to understand where people are coming from.

? What Can I Do?

If microaggressions are, as the definition says, often unintentional, can we be intentional and reduce them? Here are some things to keep in mind that might shape our intentions:

- Don't assume you know anything about a person, what they think or what they know, by what you see on the surface.
- You are not entitled to comment on a person's appearance, body, or presumed identity, unless your opinion is solicited.
- Wait for an invitation to ask a personal question, and remember that some people might classify a question as personal that you would be happy to answer yourself. If you want to be productively curious, disclose something about yourself and see if the person reciprocates. If not, let it go.
- Touching people presumes familiarity and should be preceded by an invitation to be touched. Compliment someone's fashion sense, or ask them where they get their hair cut if you need a haircut, but keep your hands to yourself.
- At work, be specific in your observations about social differences, preferably with evidence drawn from the current workforce at your work location. Make sure you are expressing an informed opinion, not a misinformed opinion.

Impact of Bias in the Workplace

Given that we all have perception errors, what's the impact of these errors on communication in the workplace? Unchecked, bias creates language, policies, operating procedures, and myriad other communications that inhibit the development of an inclusive culture. In an article titled "Perception Is Reality When It Comes to Women in the Workforce," the author cites a study showing that language (in this case, the gender interpretation of names) can also lead to discrimination and that discrimination can be perpetrated by both men and women.

For a best practices regarding diversity and inclusion, understanding and mitigating the impact of unconscious bias is now considered an essential twenty-first century leadership skill. To help develop this skill, Catalyst, a research and women's equity advocacy organization, has teamed with massive open online course (MOOC) provider edX to deliver a free, self-paced training:

[Unconscious Bias: From Awareness to Action](#).

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