

# Challenging Microaggressions and Bias at Work

## PURPOSE

This guide aims to breakdown the concept of microaggressions and what they look like in different contexts as well as reflection and action steps for if you witness or commit one. These concepts are heavily informed through the lens of experiences common to Black employees but also can be experienced by other individuals who identify as BIPOC or from other historically excluded groups.

## MICROAGGRESSIONS DEFINED

### Microaggression Definition

Microaggressions are subtle acts of exclusion made towards individuals or groups. They can come in verbal, behavioural, and environmental form. Many individuals from historically excluded communities experience microaggressions daily which often results in a negative impact on mental health. Furthermore, this negative toll is compounded from an intersectional lens when viewed through the experiences of individuals from overlapping, oppressed identities.

### Types of Microaggressions

Microaggression	Definition
Microinsult	<p><b>Definition:</b> Microinsults consist of rude and insensitive comments or actions that are not meant to be discriminatory.</p> <p><b>Examples:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Verbal: Using “well-spoken” or “articulate” to describe the speech of a Black person.</li><li>• Behavioural: Mixing up the only two Black people at work.</li></ul>
Microinvalidation	<p><b>Definition:</b> Microinvalidations are comments or actions that invalidate someone’s lived experiences.</p> <p><b>Examples:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Verbal: Asking a Black person who has grown up in Canada where they are “really” from.</li><li>• Verbal: Saying “I don’t see colour.”</li></ul>
Microassault	<p><b>Definition:</b> Microassaults are deliberate comments or actions that are discriminatory without meaning to be offensive.</p> <p><b>Examples:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Environmental: Having a policy that deems natural Black curly hair and protective hair styles as not professional.</li><li>• Verbal: Labelling a racist comment as just a “joke.”</li></ul>

## Navigating Microaggressions You've Caused

### Examples

**Microaggression:** Saying "You are so articulate/well-spoken."

**Impact to Black Team Members:**

This comment implies that it is surprising for a Black person to be well educated and knowledgeable and reinforces harmful stereotypes that Black people are less intelligent and less capable than others.

**Questions to Ask Yourself:**

- Why is it surprising to me that my Black colleague is a strong presenter?
- Would I and have I used these words, phrasing, and tone with non-Black people with strong presentation skills and if not why is that?

**Actions to Take to Address It:**

When trying to compliment someone on their presentation skills think more carefully about your word choice, tone and reason behind why you are giving them a particular compliment and focus on how to act more mindfully.

**Microaggression:** Saying "You don't act Black."

**Impact to Black Team Members:**

This implies there is a stereotypical way of acting Black that the commentator expects from the individual and a positive or negative reaction when the individual doesn't fit into that stereotype. It assumes all Black people are the same instead of unique individuals.

**Questions to Ask Yourself:**

- What does "acting Black" mean and what assumptions am I making?
- In what ways does generalizing someone's experiences based on their race cause harm and how would I feel if it was done to me?

**Actions to Take to Address It:**

Pause before making race-based comments and consider how you would feel if someone made a similar comment about you. Question why you are wanting to make a particular race-based comment and challenge yourself on what the implications are around the comment you are making before saying it.

**Microaggression:** Describing a Black person's behaviour or tone as "aggressive."

**Impact to Black Team Members:**

Similar to the words "articulate" and "well-spoken" the word aggressive has historical context and implications behind its use that suggest that Black people are more violent and there is justification in dehumanizing them.

**Questions to Ask Yourself:**

- What makes someone's tone or actions "aggressive" and would I still use this language if someone of a different race was exhibiting these behaviours?
- How might my discomfort be blocking me from the message that is being conveyed because of a perceived threat to my safety?

**Actions to Take to Address It:**

Pause and reflect on the actual discussion or actions being displayed and what is the actual content of what is being discussed. Think about how your assumptions are adding to a perceived threat to your safety and work to decenter yourself and focus on what is relevant to the situation.

**Microaggression:** Saying “I’m not racist. I have a Black friend.”

**Impact to Black Team Members:**

This comment is dismissive of the actions the speaker may have caused and the work that needs to be done towards anti-Black racism. It also tokenizes the Black friend or friends that you have as a way to absolve the speaker from their own self-work on racism. This is because it is possible to have Black friends and still commit microaggressions and acts of racism towards Black people including those friends.

**Questions to Ask Yourself:**

- Have I ever checked in on my friends and had an honest conversation about race and the harm that I have caused or perpetuated in the past? If not why not and how can I be sure that I’m not causing harm if I haven’t?
- What does racism or being racist mean and what could be missing in my definition of it?

**Actions to Take to Address It:**

Spend more time to learn about microaggressions and acts of racism caused towards the Black community and seek feedback on your own actions (and change them if you are someone causing harm).

**Microaggression:** Referring to a Black person as “resilient.”

**Impact to Black Team Members:**

The impact of this comment is that there is an expectation placed on Black people to put up with racism and microaggressions and that them doing so is admirable.

**Questions to Ask Yourself:**

- Why do I put more ownership on a Black person putting up with harm rather than doing something about the people or systems causing the harm?
- How does expecting a Black person to be resilient stop them from being able to show other emotions that are a valid response to the experiences they may be having?

**Actions to Take to Address It:**

Give team members the space to show up as they are and do not put expectations that showing strength or a lack of emotional impact in times of challenge is expected. Create a more human experience to navigating challenges and vulnerabilities.

**Microaggression:** Telling a Black person they are too loud or animated in their regular day to day actions.

**Impact to Black Team Members:**

Historically Black people have been forced to make themselves smaller and take up less space rather than stepping more into their own power.

**Questions to Ask Yourself:**

- What is the impact of telling someone to not show up as themselves?
- How have I responded to others who act excited or speak more loudly in their conversations?

**Actions to Take to Address It:**

Determine if it’s a preference or necessity before commenting on how a person talks or acts and what the impact is to the individual and broader group by commenting on this.

**Microaggression:** Asking a Black person “Where are you really from?”

**Impact to Black Team Members:**

This comment invalidates someone’s lived experiences and makes an assumption that their reality is not real and that they don’t belong where they are based on their race.

**Questions to Ask Yourself:**

- Why am I assuming that a Black person can't have grown up in the place they have stated they are from?
- What does it mean to be from somewhere and what right do I have to question someone's experiences?

**Actions to Take to Address It:**

If someone tells you where they are from trust that they know better than you do. If you are asking about an ethnic background reframe your questions. Asking this question of someone depends on the context and your relationship with the person.

**Microaggression:** Saying a Black person isn't "professional" enough.

**Impact to Black Team Members:**

Professionalism in the workplace is often conflated with whiteness (i.e. Professional hair means to have straight hair or speak in a way that is more palatable to a whiter audience). For many marginalized communities it is often a detractor from authenticity.

**Questions to Ask Yourself:**

- What does it mean to be professional?
- Whose behaviours and actions are having to be changed more to fit into my definition of professionalism?

**Actions to Take to Address It:**

Question yourself before using the word professional to set expectations for your team members. Ask yourself whose perspectives you are missing or devaluing when you use this term. Identify what is truly needed for an individual to be successful in a role and build your culture around this instead.

**Microaggression:** Asking to touch a Black person's hair or touching a Black person's hair without permission.

**Impact to Black Team Members:**

This action is dehumanizing, and it equates the treatment of Black people to behaviour you would demonstrate with a pet.

**Questions to Ask Yourself:**

- Why do I feel I have the right to touch someone in any way without their permission?
- How would I feel if people regularly asked to touch my hair or touched my hair with permission on a regular basis?

**Actions to Take to Address It:**

Pause, reflect, and just don't do it. If you are unaware of the long history and experiences of Black people in regard to their natural hair in workplaces and other settings do your research to learn more.

**Microaggression:** Engaging in "[tone policing](#)."

**Impact to Black Team Members:**

This behaviour is often used as a silencing tactic to derail a discussion by focusing on the emotion of what someone is saying instead of the validity of their actual comments. It connects to Black people often in conjunction with words like aggressive or when Black people are referred to as too loud.

**Questions to Ask Yourself:**

- How have I addressed the contents of what has been brought forward by the individual I'm speaking with?
- How is the person's tone relevant to the matter being discussed?

**Actions to Take to Address It:**

Prioritize the message being brought forward in the conversation and focus on addressing this only. Consider the validity behind the tone a person uses within the context and why they might be expressing themselves this way.

**Microaggression:** Engaging in racial gaslighting.

**Impact to Black Team Members:**

This action is another way to invalidate the daily experiences Black people face regarding racism. Instead of addressing the situation itself it is a way of denying or minimizing the experience and further perpetuating harm. Similar phrases or actions would include suggesting someone is “oversensitive” or “misunderstood” the situation.

**Questions to Ask Yourself:**

- What makes me confident in claiming that a situation wasn’t connected to race and how can I be sure of that?
- What harm may I be causing by denying the lived experiences of the team member who is vulnerable enough to share with me their concerns?

**Actions to Take to Address It:**

Don’t question that you know a Black person’s lived experiences with race better than they do. Do more self-learning on the impact racism has on Black people and the ways that it can show up in different settings both advertently and inadvertently.

**Microaggression:** Saying “we’re lucky these kinds of things don’t happen here” regarding witnessing a racist action committed somewhere else in the world.

**Impact to Black Team Members:**

This comment invalidates the real-life experiences that Black people face daily at home and denies the realities of everyday racism.

**Questions to Ask Yourself:**

- What are your own experiences with racism in your daily life and how might that impact your views of what someone else experiences?
- What steps have you taken to learn about, acknowledge and address racism where you live?

**Actions to Take to Address It:**

Do more to learn about how racism impacts BIPOC people in different contexts at home. Be intentional in not assuming the experiences of others based on your own experiences with racism.

**Microaggression:** Regularly mixing up the names of the only two Black people you work with.

**Impact to Black Team Members:**

This action shows a lack of care and concern for learning about the people you work with and marks Black employees as people you see as interchangeable instead of unique individuals.

**Questions to Ask Yourself:**

- Why do I mix some people up in the office and not others?
- How can I take the steps to be more intentional when addressing individuals?

**Actions to Take to Address It:**

Be intentional about learning people’s names and correcting your mistakes when you mix individuals up then work to not repeat your mistakes.

**Microaggression:** Mistaking a Black leader for support staff.

**Impact to Black Team Members:**

This action aims to discredit the capabilities of Black employees and their ability to be in leadership positions.

**Questions to Ask Yourself:**

- When I walk into a room who do I readily assume is in charge?

- How can I change my biases around what a leader looks like and work towards not perpetuating harmful stereotypes?

**Actions to Take to Address It:**

Do more work on challenging your assumptions before voicing them and pausing to reflect on why you believe a narrative to be true before jumping to conclusions. Ask questions before assuming.

**Microaggression:** Questioning the qualifications and credibility of a Black person.

**Impact to Black Team Members:**

Black people are often more challenged than peers with the same skillsets and qualifications meaning that they often must have even more qualifications to be considered to have the same expertise as peers with less qualifications.

**Questions to Ask Yourself:**

- Would you still be asking these questions if the person was not Black and how often have you done this to others?
- Why are you assuming that the individual isn't properly qualified (especially if they are speaking to a topic you have no knowledge of)?

**Actions to Take to Address It:**

Reflect on past experiences you've had on expertise and who you regularly challenge. If someone has been hired for their expertise, then trust it. Put yourself into the shoes of the individual being critiqued and think about what it would be like to have someone constantly critique your expertise if they themselves didn't have this expertise.

**Microaggression:** Engaging in tokenizing a Black person.

**Impact to Black Team Members:**

This is a performative action towards inclusion that ignores the racism and structural challenges Black people face on the daily. Related to saying "I'm not racist, I have a Black friend." Tokenism is tolling and causes harm to Black and other marginalized community members.

**Questions to Ask Yourself:**

- What actions have I and my organization taken to address racism at the interpersonal and structural levels?
- In what ways am I putting pressure or onus on Black team members to be the representative for an entire group of people?

**Actions to Take to Address It:**

Learn about different contexts for how tokenism shows up and the steps to take to ensure you are not engaging in this practice.

- [Tips to Avoid Tokenism](#)
- [Additional Tips to Avoid Tokenism](#)

**Microaggression:** Perpetuating the "[bias threshold](#)" that suggests that Black people should have a higher tolerance for enduring racism as a means of being more respectable and professional.

**Impact to Black Team Members:**

This behaviour is an unwarranted toll that harms the person being impacted by racism instead of addressing the person or situation the racist act was committed in. Often a Black person is left to dismiss or brush racism off to diffuse the situation so they can decrease the chances of there being a negative impact on themselves instead.

**Questions to Ask Yourself:**

- Why am I spending more time telling the person harmed to be the bigger person rather than addressing the person committing the harm?

- Why am I finding it more respectful and appropriate to be quiet about racism and microaggressions then to speak up about them and what harm do I cause by taking this approach?

**Actions to Take to Address It:**

Pause and reflect on who the victim is of harm and who the one causing the harm is. Challenge yourself on why it is more acceptable to have the victim ignore the harm then addressing the one causing the harm and work to change this.

**EXTERNALLY DISPLAYED MICROAGGRESSIONS (MICROAGGRESSIONS YOU’VE WITNESSED)**

**Addressing Microaggressions You’ve Witnessed**

Who You Are	How to Address
<p>Manager/Leader</p>	<p><b><u>In A Meeting/Group Conversation</u></b></p> <p><b>Actions to Take During:</b></p> <p>Call out the microaggression in a way that doesn’t spotlight on anyone who is personally impacted and redirect the convo.</p> <p>Example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hey, I don’t believe that’s an appropriate comment/action for this convo let’s focus on our topic of “x.”</li> </ul> <p>Note: It is important to call out microaggressions if they occur in group settings. Not calling them out in this moment can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Signal to other present individuals that this behaviour is ok.</li> <li>• Signal to any impacted individuals that microaggressions are tolerated and they may not be in a space that they can feel safe.</li> </ul> <p><b>Actions to Take Later:</b></p> <p>Have a follow up one on one conversation with the individual to discuss the situation and why it was harmful. You can use Kwame Christian’s Engaged Communication Framework for having difficult conversations about race as a starting base.</p> <p>Example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe the situation (i.e. Yesterday you said “x”)</li> <li>• Describe the impact in relation to how it made you feel* (i.e. When you said “x” it made me feel uncomfortable because...)</li> <li>• Bring forward an invitation of how you can have a productive dialogue on this (i.e. I’d like to discuss with you so we can have a positive space/dialogue etc. going forward.</li> </ul> <p>*It is better to describe impact in terms of how you feel to diffuse the chance of a person arguing back with you because it is hard to argue someone’s feelings.</p> <p><b>Additional Steps to Take:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If the person who was the topic of the microaggression was present, some additional considerations to take are to make sure you do a follow up and check in with them post the meeting.</li> <li>• Consider broader team training or resources to share.</li> </ul>

	<p><b><u>In a One-on-One Interaction</u></b></p> <p><b>Actions to Take During:</b></p> <p>Call out microaggression directly in the conversation.</p> <p>Example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Hey, you may not be aware but that is actually a harmful comment because of “x” reason”</li> </ul> <p><b>Actions to Take Later:</b></p> <p>Have a follow up conversation if you didn’t directly discuss it in the initial moment. Consider the “engaged communication” framework.</p> <p><b>Why Different Approaches:</b></p> <p>In a one-on-one conversation there is room to call out a microaggression and have a conversation directly with the person who has exhibited the action since it does not involve putting any impacted individuals directly in the spotlight and causing further harm. It also means that the person who caused the microaggression may be less defensive than they would be if called out in a group and potentially more open to a constructive conversation.</p>
Peer	<p><b><u>In A Meeting</u></b></p> <p><b>Actions to Take During:</b></p> <p>Call out the microaggression in a way that doesn’t spotlight on anyone who is personally impacted and redirect the convo or call it out in a way that forces the person who caused the microaggression to reflect on their actions.</p> <p>Example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hey, I don’t believe that’s an appropriate comment/action for this convo let’s focus on our topic of “x.”</li> <li>• I don’t understand the joke can you explain it?*</li> </ul> <p>*Asking someone to explain their microaggression based jokes or comments means they often will have to explain it and explicitly describe the harm part of their comments (i.e.. The fact that it is rooted in racism). This often will cause the person who made their comment to pause and reflect about what they are saying and why.</p> <p><b>Actions to Take Later:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have a follow up conversation. Consider using the “Engaged Communication framework.”</li> <li>• Consider potentially sharing resources that you may have on the topic.</li> <li>• Speak with your manager or leader about having a conversation with the individual who caused the microaggression.</li> </ul> <p><b><u>In a One-on-One Interaction</u></b></p> <p><b>Actions to Take During:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Same as manager/leader one on one</li> </ul> <p><b>Actions to Take Later:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Same as manager/leader one on one</li> </ul>



	<p><b>Why Different Approaches:</b></p> <p>Same as manager/leader one on one reason.</p>
<p>Impacted Individual</p>	<p><b><u>Additional Key Reminders</u></b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Microaggressions shouldn't be left up to the responsibility of the impacted individual to call out. This often causes further harm to the person impacted and puts them in a position of greater risking their emotional wellbeing.</li> <li>2) If an impacted individual experiences a microaggression they may do the following in protection of their peace/safety: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Be silent.</li> <li>b. Laugh to dismiss the microaggression.</li> <li>c. Change the topic.</li> <li>d. Address the topic in a roundabout way as to not cause the aggressor to behave defensively.</li> </ol> </li> </ol>

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES & REFERENCES

- [Types of Microaggressions](#)
- [The Micropedia of Microaggressions](#)
- [How to Have Difficult Conversations About Race by Kwame Christian](#)
- [Professionalism Is a Racist Construct](#)
- [The Bias of "Professionalism" Standards](#)