How to respond to microaggressions

Lean In Circle Discussion Guide for Asian Women
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Meeting agenda

Member updates  15 mins

Watch video  7 mins

Icebreaker  10 mins

Activities

- Activity 1: Reviewing strategies  15 mins
- Activity 2: Workshopping responses  15 mins
- Activity 3: Mitigating the impact  15 mins

One Action  10 mins
Member updates

Go around your Circle and share personal updates. As a general rule, personal updates should be brief and focus on big changes and important decisions in your life. (It’s OK not to have one every month!) If you have a One Action update, share that with your Circle.

Watch video 7 mins

Icebreaker 10 mins

Circle Leaders will read aloud the below list of common microaggressions faced by Asian women in white-dominated workplaces. Raise your hand if you’ve experienced these microaggressions at work (2 minutes):

- Someone questioned your abilities or judged you as less than capable at your job
- You were ignored or spoken over in a meeting
- You were treated like a child
- You were left out of social events or meetings due to your race or ethnicity
- Someone talked negatively about people who share your background
- Someone else got credit for your idea or work
- Someone asked you, “Where are you really from?”
- You felt judged for your accent or manner of speaking
- Someone mistook you for another person of your same race or ethnicity
- You were told you’re not leadership material or passed over for a promotion to a leadership position
- Your achievements at work were ignored or glossed over

Continue activity on next page
Icebreaker (continued)  

- You were automatically assigned more “submissive” roles like taking notes or office housework

Discuss icebreaker

- Are there any microaggressions you’ve experienced repeatedly that weren’t on the list?
- How did you feel about the microaggressions experienced by your fellow Circle members?
- What did you learn from seeing other people’s responses?
- Did anything surprise you?

“‘Where are you from?’ is a very common question. ‘Where are you really from?’ versus asking me about my heritage. How I respond depends on my relationship with the individual. It depends on whether they're genuinely curious, or they're being flippant and making me feel like a perpetual foreigner.”

Sue-Ann Hong, president and CEO, non-profit, Georgia, USA (she/her)
Activity 1: Reviewing strategies

Before we dive into this activity, know that it’s always OK to *not* respond to a microaggression. The burden shouldn’t be on those most impacted to fight injustices themselves. It’s fine to just focus on staying safe and taking good care of yourself. But if you do want to respond, research shows it can make you feel more empowered and in control.

Here are the main research-based strategies for responding to a microaggression:

- State the facts (e.g., tell someone your job title or qualifications in a simple, direct way and then move the conversation on)
- Ask a question (e.g., say, “What makes you say that?”)
- Follow up privately

Discuss as a group:

- Which of these responses have you used in real life?
- How effective were they?
- Which responses do you think would be most helpful to use in the future?
Think of a microaggression you’ve experienced where you wish you’d responded differently, or responded at all.

Go around the room and have everyone share with the group what happened and what they wish they’d done differently.

Then, if you feel comfortable, ask other group members for their advice—what would they say in that situation?

“As an Asian American, I do experience microaggressions at work. I once sat down with a new group of colleagues and I said, ‘Hello,’ to my neighbor and she says, ‘Sarah, I just met you. You work in finance.’ What had just happened is she confused me with another Asian woman. And so I want to say to other non-Asians, take the time to get to know us. If you need to spend a bit more time so you can tell us apart, that would be much appreciated.”

Jolene Jang, Asian inclusivity speaker, Lean In Network Leader, Washington, USA (she/her)
Activity 3: Mitigating the impact 15 mins

- Discuss as a group: How have microaggressions impacted you?
  - Have your physical and mental health been affected?
  - Have microaggressions hurt your ability to do your job effectively?
- What strategies have helped mitigate the impact (e.g., talking to others, reminding yourself of your worth, basic self-care)?
  - Do you struggle with self-care (e.g., you feel guilty or like you don’t “deserve” self-care)? If so, what strategies have helped you overcome these thoughts so you can effectively care for yourself?
- Consider setting up a group chat with others in this group to share stories, advice, empathy, and validation (e.g., a Slack channel or WhatsApp group).
  - Research shows there are tremendous mental health benefits in talking to others who share your identity about any disrespect you face at work.
- The “model minority myth” is the idea that Asian Americans are universally successful, and is sometimes used to pit us against other racial or ethnic groups. It can also result in the idea that Asian Americans are able to overcome racism through sheer hard work. Does this ring true for you? How has the model minority myth shown up in your professional life?
  - As a result, Asian American women may feel it’s more difficult to identify or talk about the microaggressions they experience. Is this something you struggle with? What strategies can you use to validate yourself?
One Action 10 mins

- Think about one strategy you could use to mitigate the impact of microaggressions in your own life (e.g., self-care or setting up a group chat to share stories).
- Commit to implementing one of these strategies in your own life the next time you experience a microaggression.
- Share your commitment with your Circle (spending 1 minute or less per member).
- When you meet next time, you can check in on each other’s progress.

Congratulations on a great meeting!