How to respond to microaggressions

Lean In Circle Discussion Guide for LGBTQ+ Groups
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Meeting agenda  approx 90 mins

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

For Circles with only 60 mins, here are suggestions to shorten this agenda:

- Encourage members to watch the video in advance
- Spend 5 mins on member updates
- Spend 10 mins on activity 1 and activity 3
Getting started

Member updates

2 mins or less per member  |  15-20 mins depending on group size

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

Why are we here?

- Today’s meeting is for LGBTQ+ women and others who experience the biases that women face. Due to a combination of sexism, transphobia, and homophobia, we face more frequent microaggressions than almost any other group. These types of comments are common across the world, and can be much more explicit and harsher in some countries than others.¹

- Research shows that there are steps you can take to reduce the impact on your mental and physical health. This guide will help you to take some of those steps, including speaking up against the microaggression and getting validation from others who share your identity.

“My lived experience is one in which many people don't assume that I'm a lesbian, even though I am. I certainly in the earliest part of my career did overhear disparaging remarks.”

Deena Fidas, managing director, nonprofit, Washington, DC, USA (she/her)
Circle Leaders will read aloud the below list of common microaggressions faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in workplaces around the world. Raise your hand if you’ve experienced these microaggressions at work:

- Someone commented on your appearance
- You heard negative comments, slurs, or jokes about LGBTQ+ people at work
- You were judged for how you present yourself at work
- You were made to feel that you had to be careful speaking about your personal life at work
- You were judged for using the bathroom that aligns with your gender identity
- You were ignored or spoken over in a meeting
- Someone else got credit for your idea or work
- You were told that you are too outspoken or confrontational
- You were criticized for your demeanor
- Your professional judgment was questioned

**Discuss icebreaker**

- What did you learn from seeing other people’s responses?
- Did anything surprise you?
- 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?
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, and 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? What was the impact of your response?
- Which responses do you think would be most helpful to use in the future?
Activity 2: Workshopping responses

- 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?

“There's always that little feeling in your throat when you first join a new workplace. What's going to happen when I talk about my partner for the first time, or what's going to happen when I share my pronouns for the first time? Or what's going to happen when I refer to some experience in my life in an offhanded way that involves being gay or being non-binary? And that can be really scary, especially walking into a new workplace.”

Becca Bernstein, senior manager, OptionB.Org, Illinois, USA (they/them)
Activity 3: Mitigating the impact  15 mins

- Discuss as a group: How have microaggressions impacted you?
  - Have your physical and mental health been affected?

- What strategies have helped mitigate the impact (e.g., talking to others, reminding yourself of your worth, basic self-care)?
  - What does self-care in your professional life look like? What does it look like in your personal life?

- 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.
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!

Endnotes
