How to respond to microaggressions

Lean In Circle Discussion Guide for All Women
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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 resources  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 15 mins on activity 1 and activity 3

The stock photography used in this guide is courtesy of Getty Images.
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

Icebreaker

Circle Leaders will read aloud the below list of common workplace microaggressions faced by women in men-dominated workplaces. Raise your hand if you’ve experienced these microaggressions at work:

- You were interrupted, ignored, or spoken over
- Someone questioned your abilities or judged you as less than capable at your job
- Someone “mansplained” to you (i.e., explained something to you that you are already expert in)
- You were left out of a men-dominated social event
- Someone else got credit for your idea or work
- Someone assumed that your role was more junior than it really was
- You received comments on your emotional state
- Someone assumed you wanted to prioritize your family responsibilities over work
- You were expected to do “office housework” more often than men, such as note-taking, catering, or other tasks not in your job description
- You heard judgmental language about your personality, such as “abrasive,” “aggressive,” “too nice,” or “lacking confidence”
- You were judged on how you dressed or presented yourself
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?

“When you experience microaggressions, you need to take care of yourself afterwards. Recognize how you're feeling, name the emotion. Allow that feeling to be there. And then ask yourself, what can you do to make yourself feel better? Maybe it’s writing a text to a friend or calling someone and just having a sounding board. Maybe it's going for a walk, maybe it's doing exercise.”

Zee Clarke, CEO and entrepreneur, author of *Black People Breathe*, New Mexico, USA (she/her)
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 15 mins

- Think of a microaggression you’ve experienced where you wish you’d responded differently, or responded at all
- Go around the room and share with the group what happened and what you wish you’d done differently
  - Then, if you feel comfortable, ask group members for their advice—what would they say in that situation?

“I’ve received many microaggressions over the years, and I’ve gotten better about speaking up. Early in my career, I would just shut down and be intimidated. Culturally, my father was the dominant person in the home, and when he raised his voice or when he wanted something, my mother would quiet down and I would quiet down. So when I got to the workplace, if a man interrupted me, I found myself doing the same thing, but knowing it was wrong, knowing that I need to be speaking up. But I didn’t have the courage. It wasn’t until I started to get involved with Lean In, and I started to learn about women being more interrupted in meetings than men are, that I became more able to speak up for myself.”

Anna Dapelo-Garcia, executive, healthcare industry, Lean In Network Leader, California, 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?

- 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.

“We were talking through the feasibility of opening a franchise nail salon. There was a gentleman in the group who just would not let me talk. Every time I asked a question, or every time I tried to talk through what nail consumers would be looking for in a nail salon, he just kept talking over me. I just open-endedly asked him if he’s ever done his nails before, and he said ‘no’ and then got really quiet.”

Rima Fadlallah, entrepreneur and educator, Michigan, USA (she/her)
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!