

# How LGBTQ+ women can respond to microaggressions

Lean In Circle Discussion Guide

The  
Women  
at Work  
Collection

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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
- Activity 2: Workshopping responses
- Activity 3: Mitigating the impact

15 mins

15 mins

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

### Read aloud to the group:

- Today's meeting focuses on the experiences of LGBTQ+ women and others who experience the biases that women face. While we are a diverse group whose experiences vary, there are some common types of disrespect, assumptions, or biased comments that many of us encounter at work. These experiences can happen anywhere in the world, but can be more explicit and harsher in some countries than others.<sup>1</sup>
- 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 for yourself and getting validation from others who share important aspects of 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)

# Icebreaker

10 mins

Read aloud to the group: I'm going to read a list of some common microaggressions faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in workplaces around the world. Raise your hand if this has happened to you:

- Someone commented on your appearance in a way that felt disrespectful or uncomfortable
- 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?
- How did you feel about the experiences your fellow Circle members shared?
- Have you experienced any kinds of disrespect at work that aren't on the list?

## Activity 1: Reviewing strategies

15 mins

**Read aloud to the group:** Before we dive into this activity, know that it's always okay to **not** respond to a microaggression. The burden shouldn't always be on LGBTQ+ individuals to advocate for change. 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:

- **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** that encourages the person to question their assumptions (e.g., researchers recommend asking, "What makes you say that?")
- **Follow up privately** with the person later, so that you have a chance to prepare.

**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?
- Are there any other types of response to workplace disrespect that you would recommend?
- Which responses do you think would be most helpful to use in the future?

## Activity 2: Workshopping responses

15 mins

- Think of time when you experienced a microaggression and 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 off-handed way that involves being gay or being nonbinary? 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 has the experience of workplace 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 important aspects of 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 workplace microaggressions in your own life (e.g., self-care or setting up a group chat to share stories).
- Commit to implementing this strategy the next time you experience workplace bias or disrespect.
- Share your commitment with your Circle (spending 1 minute or less per member).
- When you meet next time, you can check in and discuss how well the strategy worked.

**Congratulations on a great meeting!**

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, *Women in the Workplace 2021* (Oct 2021); Peter Bailinson et al., "[LGBTQ+ voices: Learning from lived experiences](#)," *The McKinsey Quarterly* (2020); Sucharita Maji et al., "[As If I Use a Filter As If I Use a Filter, and It Has Become a Part of Me](#)"; Discriminatory Workplace Experiences of Lesbian and Gay Employees of India," *The Qualitative Report* 28, no. 6 (2023); Vasileia Papadaki et al., "[Microaggression experiences in the workplace among Greek LGB social workers](#)," *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* 33, no. 4 (2021); Yiu Tung Suen et al., "[The Experiences of Sexual and Gender Minorities in Employment: Evidence from a Large-scale Survey of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex People in China](#)," *The China Quarterly* (June 2020); Daniel Kipchumba, "[War on the Gay and Lesbian Community in Kenya](#)," *The Gay And Lesbian Review* (July 25, 2023); Kehinde Okanlawon, "[Perceptions and attitudes of heterosexual Nigerian University students towards homosexuality and LGB persons](#)," *Journal of LGBT Youth* 16 (2019).



**Notes**

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