

RACE

When and How to Respond to Microaggressions

by [Ella F. Washington](#), [Alison Hall Birch](#) and [Laura Morgan Roberts](#)

July 03, 2020



HBR Staff/KKGAS/Stocksy

In U.S. workplaces — and around the world — people are finally engaging in real conversations about race, justice, diversity, equality, and inclusion. That’s a good thing, hopefully paving the way for meaningful anti-racist action from both individuals and organizations. But those discussions will in all likelihood be very uncomfortable — not just for white employees and leaders who might be confronting their privilege for the first time but also for people of color, especially Black Americans, who know that candid talks with colleagues will mean they either face or need to call out “microaggressions.”

These are incidents in which someone accidentally (or purposely) makes an offensive statement or asks an insensitive question. Microaggressions are defined as verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group. For Black people, they are ubiquitous across daily work and life. Here are a few seemingly innocuous statements that, in the context of racist assumptions and stereotypes, can be quite damaging.

- “When I see you, I don’t see color.” (signaling that the person doesn’t acknowledge your Blackness or won’t hold it against you)
- “We are all one race: the human race.” (signaling that your experience as a Black person is no different from the experience of people of other races)
- “You are so articulate.” (signaling that Black people are not usually capable of competent intellectual conversation)
- “I see your hair is big today! Are you planning to wear it like that to the client meeting?” (signaling that natural Black hairstyles are not professional)
- “Everyone can succeed in society if they work hard enough.” (signaling that disparate outcomes for Black people result from laziness)

As suggested by the name, microaggressions seem small; but compounded over time, they can have a deleterious impact on an employee’s experience, physical health, and psychological well-being. In fact, research suggests that subtle forms of interpersonal discrimination like microaggressions are *at least as harmful* as more-overt expressions of discrimination.

Microaggressions reinforce white privilege and undermine a culture of inclusion. The best solution is, of course, increasing awareness of microaggressions, insisting that non-Black employees stop committing them, and calling out those who do. But in the absence of those changes — and understanding that complete prevention is probably impossible — how should Black employees and managers respond to the microaggressions they face, within and outside of current discussions around race in the workplace?

There are three main ways to react:

Let it go. For a long time, the most common default response was choosing not to address offensive comments in the workplace. Because they are pervasive yet subtle, they can be emotionally draining to confront. Yet silence places an emotional tax on Black employees, who are left wondering what happened and why, questioning their right to feel offended, and reinforcing beliefs that they are not safe from identity devaluation at work.

Respond immediately. This approach allows the transgression to be called out and its impact explained while the details of the incident are fresh in the minds of everyone involved. Immediacy is an important component of correcting bad behavior. But this approach can be risky. The perpetrator might get defensive, leaving the target feeling like they somehow “lost control,” did not show up as their best self, and will be labeled an overly sensitive whiner, a trouble-maker, or the stereotypical angry Black person.

Respond later. A more tempered response is to address the perpetrator privately at a later point to explain why the microaggression was offensive. Here, the risk lies in the time lag. A follow-up conversation requires helping the person who committed the microaggression to first recall it and then to appreciate its impact. The Black employee bringing it up might be deemed petty — like someone who has been harboring resentment or holding on to “little things” while the other party, having “meant no harm,” has moved on. Such accusations are a form of racial gaslighting, which can be very damaging.

We recommend the following framework for determining which course is best for you in any given situation and then, if you decide to respond, ensuring an effective dialogue.

Discern. Determine how much of an investment you want to make in addressing the microaggression. Do not feel pressured to respond to every incident; rather, feel empowered to do so when you decide you should. Consider:

- *The importance of the issue and the relationship.* If either is or both are important to you, avoidance is the wrong approach. Express yourself in a way that honors your care for the other party, and assert yourself in a way that acknowledges your concern about the issue.

- *Your feelings.* Microaggressions can make you doubt the legitimacy of your reactions. Allow yourself to feel what you feel, whether it's anger, disappointment, frustration, aggravation, confusion, embarrassment, exhaustion, or something else. Any emotion is legitimate and should factor into your decision about whether, how, and when to respond. With more-active negative emotions such as anger, it's often best to address the incident later. If you're confused, an immediate response might be preferable. If you're simply exhausted from the weight of working while Black, maybe it is best to let it go — meaning best for you, not for the perpetrator.
- *How you want to be perceived now and in the future.* There are consequences to speaking up and to remaining silent. Only you can determine which holds more weight for you in any specific situation.

Disarm. If you choose to confront a microaggression, be prepared to disarm the person who committed it. One reason we avoid conversations about race is that they make people defensive. Perpetrators of microaggressions typically fear being perceived — or worse, revealed — as racist. Explain that the conversation might get uncomfortable for them but that what they just said or did was uncomfortable for you. Invite them to sit alongside you in the awkwardness of their words or deeds while you get to the root of their behavior together.

Defy. Challenge the perpetrator to clarify their statement or action. Use a probing question, such as “*How do you mean that?*” This gives people a chance to check themselves as they unpack what happened. And it gives you an opportunity to better gauge the perpetrator's intent. One of the greatest privileges is the freedom not to notice you have privilege; so microaggressions are often inadvertently offensive. Acknowledge that you accept their intentions to be as they stated but reframe the conversation around the impact of the microaggression. Explain how you initially interpreted it and why. If they continue to assert that they “*didn't mean it like that,*” remind them that you appreciate their willingness to clarify their intent and hope they appreciate your willingness to clarify their impact.

Decide. You control what this incident will mean for your life and your work — what you will take from the interaction and what you will allow it to take from you. Black people, as well as those with various other marginalized and intersectional identities, are already subject to biased expectations and evaluations in the workplace. Life is sufficiently taxing without allowing microaggressions to bring you down. Let protecting your joy be your greatest and most persistent act of resistance.

A note of advice for non-Black allies old and new: The work of allyship is difficult. You will make mistakes as you learn — and you will always be learning. For anyone accused of committing a microaggression or counseling someone who has been accused, here are a few notes on how to respond:

- Remember that intent does not supersede impact.
- Seek to understand the experiences of your Black peers, bosses, and employees without making them responsible for your edification.
- Believe your Black colleagues when they choose to share their insights; don't get defensive or play devil's advocate.
- Get comfortable rethinking much of what you thought to be true about the world and your workplace and accept that you have likely been complicit in producing inequity.

Although more organizations are encouraging candid discussions on race in the workplace, we cannot ignore the historical backlash that Black employees have endured for speaking up. Cultural change takes time and intention. So while we encourage timely and strategic dialogue about microaggressions, it is ultimately up to each individual to respond in the way that is most authentic to who they are and how they want to be perceived.



Ella F. Washington is a professor of practice at Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business and the founder of Ellavate Solutions, which provides executive coaching and diversity and inclusion strategy and training for organizations. She can be reached at info@ellavatesolutions.com.



Alison Hall Birch is an assistant professor at the College of Business at the University of Texas, Arlington (UTA), where she studies stigma-based bias, diversity management, and leadership.



Laura Morgan Roberts is a professor of practice at the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business, and the co-editor of *Race, Work and Leadership: New Perspectives on the Black Experience* (Harvard Business Press, 2019).

This article is about RACE

[+](#) Follow This Topic

Related Topics: [Coaching](#) | [Conflict](#) | [Diversity](#)

Comments

Leave a Comment

[Post Comment](#)

16 COMMENTS

Steve Biko 6 days ago

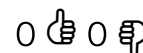
As a person of color, I find this framework to be patronizingly unhelpful at best, and at worst inimical to healthy dialogue. The authors claim that the “best solution is...increasing awareness of microaggressions,” but this solution has the opposite effect, encouraging us to amplify or locate subtle racism in statements where it is

absent.

Tell me, please, how should I discern the difference between genuine praise and racially-motivated microaggression without descending into madness from insecurity and second-guessing almost everyone around me (most of my coworkers are white) ? Can we really ever find the “true” meaning of statements that could be remotely interpreted coming from a racist place? What are the objective criteria by which to identify a microaggression? My problem with the article is that it is more concerned about policing others’ language (and thoughts) by subjective standards, without requiring any introspection.

Also, this article misses a fundamental facet of human behavior, which is that the strength of friendship between people can often be measured by the degree of insults willing to be tolerated. The more it takes to “go too far”, the closer and stronger the bond between two individuals tends to be. When originating from affection and delivered in a playful way, microaggressions - whether they be slights, insults or jokes - can do much more to strengthen relationships than enforced political correctness. Think of the concept of roasting, or the back-and-forth insults of friends. Microaggressions, directed both ways, could actually break the ice between colleagues.

 Reply



[!\[\]\(83f22ed94ec5517769dd76d702c6bfd8_img.jpg\) Join The Conversation](#)

POSTING GUIDELINES

We hope the conversations that take place on HBR.org will be energetic, constructive, and thought-provoking. To comment, readers must sign in or register. And to ensure the quality of the discussion, our moderating team will review all comments and may edit them for clarity, length, and relevance. Comments that are overly promotional, mean-spirited, or off-topic may be deleted per the moderators' judgment. All postings become the property of Harvard Business Publishing.