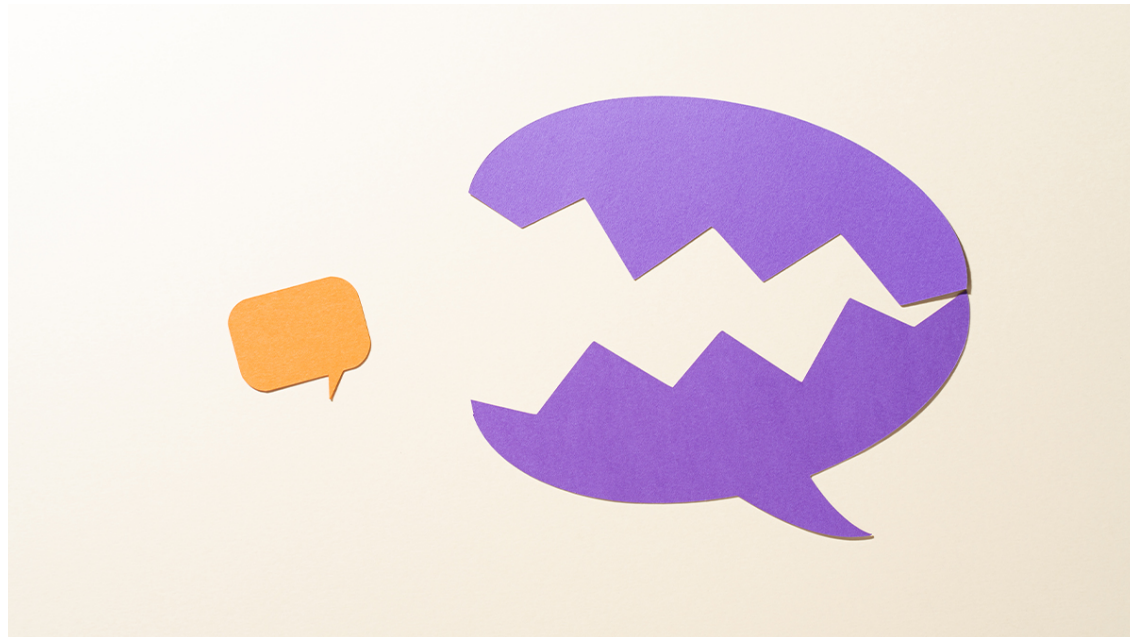


How to Intervene When You Witness a Microaggression

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Summary. Women, ethnic- and racial-minority, and LGBTQ people commonly experience microaggressions in the workplace. These behaviors often surface in the form of jokes, exclusion of some voices in meetings, or subtle remarks that denigrate the recipient. Those who... [more](#)

Microaggressions — those brief, commonplace behaviors or comments that often unintentionally exclude or demean the target — have become a frequently discussed topic in management scholarship and practice. But despite the growing understanding of the concept of microaggression in general (Google searches of the term microaggression have doubled in the past two years alone) and in academic research, in addition to the countless number of practical DEI workshops dedicated to raising awareness, they still remain a common experience for employees from non-majority groups and can be an invisible barrier holding back many DEI efforts.

Women, ethnic- and racial-minority, and LGBTQ people commonly experience microaggressions in the workplace. These behaviors often surface in the form of jokes, exclusion of some voices in meetings, or subtle remarks that denigrate the recipient. Maybe you saw a woman state an idea only to have it be attributed to a male colleague later. Perhaps the one Black woman at the office is frequently asked by others if they can touch her hair. Examples like these abound in the workplace, and they can have accumulative damaging effects on those we want to retain. Those who experience frequent microaggressions are more likely to feel excluded, to disengage, and ultimately leave their teams and organizations.

Both of us have previously explored the role of bias and exclusion as stalling mechanisms in progress toward greater gender diversity in STEM careers, an area where women are still very much underrepresented in senior leadership positions. In our recent research, we explored the experience of microaggressions for women leaders in STEM. In doing so, we uncovered some fascinating findings about the important role allies can play in any organization or field.

What microaggressions look like at work

We found that the most common types of microaggressions women in STEM experience surface in three ways that you might recognize no matter your identity or what field you work in:

- 1. Invalidation of competence.** This type of microaggression emerges as comments and behaviors that question or downplay a woman's technical skills. Examples included having one's work reassigned to a male colleague; having both male and female colleagues or clients asking to speak to a woman's male colleague even though the woman was the subject matter expert or project lead; and openly having one's technical accomplishments questioned during a performance review.
- 2. Invalidation of physical presence.** This type of microaggression emerges as interrupting behaviors during which individuals speak over a woman while she is speaking, as well as completely disregarding her physical presence by not acknowledging her during meetings or meet-and-greets.
- 3. Gaslighting behaviors and comments that diminish or deny women's experience of gender bias.** This type of microaggression takes the form of colleagues telling the woman that what she described was not gender bias — for example, by offering alternative explanations (“He’s not sexist; he’s like that with everyone,” or “Don’t you think you’re being overly sensitive about this? I didn’t even notice”).

These seemingly harmless, frequent encounters were associated with a range of negative effects for the women who experienced them, including negative emotional responses (e.g., frustration, sadness), cognitive overload (e.g., feeling overwhelmed), and overcompensating behaviors (e.g., feeling the need to constantly “prove” oneself or one's experience). Further, repeated exposure to such behaviors over time left many women emotionally exhausted and dejected. Most shared that they spent a considerable amount of cognitive energy deciphering the intent and meaning behind the aggressions, and many grappled with whether to confront the aggressor.

The combination of these negative effects ultimately made many women doubt their technical competence and ability. In fact, we found that repeated exposure to microaggressions may eventually discourage qualified and competent women from remaining in or pursuing careers in STEM.

Why microaggressions are so prevalent

If people are increasingly aware of microaggressions, why are they still such a problem? First, most microaggressions are subtle and can thus be difficult to recognize. Second, most DEI training tends to be offered as one-off sessions, which are an important first step but lack the continuity and practical skill building necessary to both recognize and address microaggressions.

Consequently, microaggressions can become so commonplace that they're often ingrained in everyday work interactions and embedded in company cultures. Further, it's often left to the target to spotlight the microaggression and educate the offender, which can take an immense emotional and psychological toll. Confronting the aggressor can also have negative professional consequences, as those who choose to address the microaggressions they experience can be labeled as troublemakers, poor sports, too sensitive, or playing the "minority card." Indeed, research shows that the cost of confrontation can be steep, especially if the confronting person is the target. And given that opportunities for development and promotion rely heavily on personal connections and relationships, it's no wonder why many targets choose to remain silent.

If microaggressions proliferate, they can contribute to exclusionary and even hostile work environments, as well as weakened relationships among targets and well-intentioned individuals. It's critical, therefore, that those who witness microaggressions intervene.

How allies can intervene

Bystanders often fail to intervene because they either don't recognize the microaggression, or if they do, they don't see it as problematic. Additionally, people who witness microaggressions often cite similar reasons for not confronting aggressors as targets do, and it may not always be safe for witnesses to publicly confront the aggressor in the moment (if, for example, the witness is junior to the microaggressor and fears direct confrontation might come with professional consequences).

We found that unprompted and supportive allies — both male and female colleagues — who intervened and interrupted the negative experiences played an important role in addressing microaggressions and mitigating their effects on the targeted women. These colleagues often had more seniority, tenure, and experience within the organization than the targets; however, there were also examples of peers intervening, suggesting that anyone can practice allyship. Here are three ways you can act as an ally when you witness microaggressions at work, no matter your level of seniority:

Know what to look for

To best help as an ally, first, educate yourself about different forms of microaggressions, and note that most will emerge as subtle behaviors and comments that are often unintended, and thus may go unnoticed by most people — including you. This means understanding and being able to identify the specific ways microaggressions manifest and impact targets. It's particularly important to listen to targets who share examples of

microaggressions, as they can provide insight into how seemingly common, everyday behaviors that you may not even recognize can denigrate certain groups.

Speak up

When and where appropriate, address microaggressions when you see them. As demonstrated in our study, intervening behaviors can be as simple as giving a woman credit for her idea during a meeting (“Thank you, Maria, for that suggestion. Let’s explore that more”), interrupting the interrupter (“Actually, Priya wasn’t done speaking”), or highlighting a woman’s competence and accomplishments if others try to incorrectly deny her abilities (“I’m pretty sure it was Rachel who wrote that code. You should ask her about it”). It’s important not to speak on behalf of the target or assume you know how they feel (“You made *her* uncomfortable”), but to speak on your own behalf (“That comment made *me* uncomfortable”).

For example, one study participant recounted a situation in which her male director openly challenged the results of her biased performance review among a group of managers who had concluded that she was too far “beneath the director’s wing” and had not accomplished much on her own — even though she had spearheaded several projects and was the only one who knew how to use the programming language necessary for them. Importantly, because the director had worked with her and could speak to her technical competence, his intervention dispelled any doubts she had about her technical abilities.

Reach out

To help women combat the frequent gaslighting they counter, validate their experiences navigating gender bias in the workplace. This can take the form of simply confirming to a colleague that what she experienced was indeed biased or inappropriate behavior.

For example, one study participant shared the validation and appreciation she felt when one of her male colleagues noticed the interrupting behavior she had experienced repeatedly in a meeting and said he was going to address it the next time it happened. This intervention was particularly impactful for the woman because it had emerged unprompted by her, confirming her reality and struggles as a woman dealing with gender bias.

This particular type of ally intervention can be done privately and may be appropriate in situations where public exposure or confrontation of the aggressor is not feasible. We found that privately supporting women can still have a powerful ameliorating influence in buffering the negative effects of microaggressions, enabling them to feel more secure and stable in their identities as STEM professionals — by, for example, preventing them from internalizing erroneous assumptions about their competence. Receiving unprompted validation from allies also helped women externalize the threat by blaming the aggressor instead of themselves while confirming their own technical abilities and belonging in STEM.

While organizations must address microaggressions at a systemic level, it's critical that targets of microaggressions not be left alone to deal with the accumulating effects of these slights. Realistically, it isn't always easy to intervene, particularly if an organization lacks psychological safety and there is fear of retaliation — even for allies. However, you can normalize allyship behaviors, helping to shape a more inclusive workplace devoid of exclusionary behaviors.

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