

Ombuds Outlook — November 2017
Ombuds/Dispute Resolution Services for Faculty
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Microaggressions in the Workplace



“Microaggressions” are those small slights, whether intended or not, that diminish our sense of value as a person and to the organization. In discussions of microaggressions and other discordant behaviors, it is less important to emphasize the objective classification of the behavior than to understand the perceptions of the impact on the affected parties. In this discussion/workshop, we will talk about workplace microaggressions and focus on possible techniques to defuse tensions and preserve the face and dignity of all parties.

Presented By:

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Day/Date: Friday, November 10, 2017
Time: 12:15—1:30
Location: UNM Business Center, SE Corner of Lomas & University, Room 1016
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RESPONDING TO MICROAGGRESSIONS

Kevin Nadal (2014) is a psychology professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and The Graduate Center, CUNY. In his work, he outlines microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations as three types of microaggressions. Microassaults are deliberate, overt incidences of discrimination. Recipients of microassaults are treated as inferior, experience lower ascribed degrees of intelligence, or are assumed deviant and more capable of criminality because of their racial/ethnic identity. Microinsults are statements that are intended to be a compliment, but may produce offense because they unconsciously and unintentionally communicate discriminatory messages to target groups. Microinvalidations are conversations that minimize or negate the lived realities of people by denying existence of racial issues or some form of discrimination. For example, individuals who experience microinvalidations may be told “You’re being too sensitive,” “Stop complaining,” or that “Racism does not exist.”

How do these microaggressions impact the workplace? Left unaddressed, microaggressions can severely damage the bottom line of an organization, foster lower quality work products/services, and create a tense work environment. Perpetrators of microaggression may consider their discourse harmless and may suggest that complaints are ‘much to do about nothing.’ However, recipients of these behaviors may experience a catch-22 challenge with resulting consequences. Responding to the offense may trigger arguments and additional microaggressions while ignoring these behaviors may foster internal resentment and the concern of appearing to condone the behavior. A proactive response to microaggressions can promote positive outcomes. Nadal suggests providing microaffirmations — subtle or apparently small acknowledgments of a person’s value and accomplishments.

Janet Asante (2015) is a career columnist for *matermea.com*. She suggests that those who experience microaggressions handle the situation by asking clarifying questions, scheduling information-gathering meetings, managing up (getting specificity on pathways for success and promoting accountability for implementation), keeping personal notes on progress, and seeking organizational resources about blatant occurrences.

Anne Fischer (2015) is a columnist for Fortune.com. She suggests that while implicit bias training may be available, it is important for all to pursue implementation of the strategies learned. Rather than allowing feelings of exclusion to reach a boiling point, establish affinity groups where people volunteer together and develop personal connections by working on common interests.

In sum, creating a positive workplace involves acknowledging that we all have biases through which others may have been offended and hurt -- intentionally or unintentionally -- and that we can take an active role in valuing others. Careful listening, refraining from defensive responses, and organizing opportunities to build cohesion can set the workplace on a course for positive interactions.

Asante, J. (2015). How to handle microaggressions at work. *Mater Mea*. Retrieved at <http://matermea.com/blog/handling-microaggression-at-work>

Fischer, A. (2015, November 19). How microaggressions can wreck your business. How microaggressions can wreck your business. Retrieved from fortune.com/2015/11/19/microaggressions-talent-business/

Nadal, K. L. (2014). A guide to responding to microaggressions. *CUNY Form*, 2 (1), 71-76.

Prepared by Nina Cooper, Graduate Assistant, Ombuds Dispute Resolution Services for Faculty, 2017

WHAT IS SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE?

Daniel Goleman discusses the importance of social intelligence in a number of environments including the workplace. Professional life often requires not only intellectual intelligence and skillsets, but also social intelligence and skills. It has been found that social intelligence stems from a different subset of brain functioning than intellectual intelligence. Goleman presents two facets of social intelligence: social awareness and social facility. Social awareness aims at understanding the thoughts and feelings of others. Social facility aims at 'fruitful' interaction with others by building on social awareness.

The skills of social awareness build on one another as people are able to delve further into understanding other peoples' mindsets. Primal empathy is described as the ability to instantaneously feel and perceive someone else's emotions through non-verbal signals. Attunement is the ability to synchronize and become 'intune' to another person through listening. Empathic accuracy is the capability of recognizing the thoughts, feelings, and even intentions of another person. By engaging in these empathic skills the awareness of how they function comes to light in the fourth skillset known as social cognition which refers to the knowledge of how the social world functions. The combination of social world understandings with a deep engagement with another person's sentiments and thinking allows for a deep social awareness. The development and focus on these skillsets allows for deeper engagement with colleagues because self-absorption and multi-tasking during interpersonal interactions are set aside.

But simply sensing how another feels, or knowing what they think or intend, does not guarantee smooth interactions. Social facility builds on social awareness to allow more effective interactions. The spectrum of social facility includes self-presentation, influence, concern, and synchrony (interacting smoothly at the nonverbal level).

Goleman's distinction between high-road and low-road capacities refers to the difference between cognitive IQ intelligence and the 'softer' intelligences known as social intelligence. Conventional ideas of social intelligence have too often focused on high-road talents like social knowledge, or the capacity for extracting the rules, protocols, and norms that guide appropriate behavior in a given social setting. This cognitive approach neglects essential noncognitive abilities like primal empathy and synchrony, and ignores capacities like concern. A purely cognitive perspective slights the essential brain-to-brain social glue that builds the foundation for any interaction. The full spectrum of social intelligence abilities embraces both high-road and low-road aptitudes that have been key to human interaction.

Goleman, D. (1995). What is social intelligence. In D. Goleman, *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. New York: Bantam Dell.

Prepared by Matthew Hoeg, Graduate Assistant, Ombuds Dispute Resolution Services for Faculty, 2017