

Microaggressions

Based on work of Dr D. Sue and Dr K. Nadal

Microaggressions are intentional or unintentional everyday slights, indignities, put-downs and insults that members of marginalized or underrepresented groups experience. The name doesn't do justice to the impact, which can be extremely hurtful.

Within our water community

The following examples have all been experienced by WEF members working in our industry. Often these are unintentional. A helpful principle in addressing such behavior is to help aggressors understand they are not under attack for their comments/behaviors, but that change would be welcome.

Age/Youth

"They're not old enough / don't have enough experience to serve in that role"

"You wouldn't know anything about this (it's before your time)."

"You're so hardworking (for your age)"

"You'll probably be gone in _____, you know millennials are job hoppers."

Notes:

If working with someone who appears younger, ask them questions about their role, what they do, and what they want to do to or are interested in, instead of assuming that they are too young to be familiar with the work.

Meritocracy as a Microaggression



I believe the most qualified person should get the job.

Implies that job criteria are being ignored to give advantages to women or people of color. In reality, employment demographics are changing very slowly.

Types of Microaggressions

Microinvalidations

Negating the feelings and experiences of othered or minoritized peoples.

Microinsults

Rude or discriminatory snubs or actions that can be slightly covert.

Microassaults

Explicit discriminatory comments or actions meant to harm the target.

Race

"Where are you from?" "No, where are you really from?"

"You don't *sound* black."

"You're so articulate"

"She's so aggressive" (a woman of color).

"Can I touch your hair?"

"When I look at you, I don't see color." [This denies the very real daily experience of being treated differently.]

- Misidentifying people of same race/ethnicity
- Mistaking someone of color for a hospitality professional rather than a fellow attendee or staff member at a gathering.
- Failing to learn to pronounce or continuing to mispronounce people's names after they have corrected you.
- Disregarding different religious traditions or their details

Notes:

Racial microaggressions have been found to cause adverse effects to both mental and physical health and well-being over time.

Education

“Do you even have a degree?”

“Where did you go to college?”

“I’m an engineer, I know all about this”

- Listing off your qualifications when someone tells you they have less education than you.

Notes:

Assuming that a degree or a degree from a certain type of education makes someone more qualified is elitist. Instead, ask about how long they have been with the organization, or what they have done previously.

Sexual Orientation/Gender Identity

“You don’t sound/look gay!”

“When did you decide to be a lesbian?”

“Aren’t you making life hard for yourself?”

“Which one of you is the ‘guy’?”

“Do I have to worry about you fancying me?”

Notes:

Stereotyping members of the LGBTQ+ community as needing to look or act a certain way denies their personal identities.



Where can I go to learn more?

Sue, D. W. (2013). *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: race, gender, and sexual orientation*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Nadal, K. L. (2014). *That's So Gay!: microaggressions and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community*

NPR: Life Kit *Microaggressions are a big deal. How to talk them out and when to walk away.* <https://www.npr.org>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/03/smarter-living/how-to-respond-to-microaggressions.html>

www.wef.org/dei for WEF’s DEI Committee resources

Gender

“You’re rather overqualified... you know, for a young girl.”

“Shouldn’t you be at home with your kids?”

“You take such good notes, can you take the notes for this meeting?”

- Name calling: sweetheart, sweetie, young lady, baby, etc.
- Asking women to ‘prove’ their qualifications, especially PhDs.
- Commenting on the appearance or attractiveness of a female colleague.

Notes:

Any of these comments are demeaning and suggest that women are looked down upon. Instead, treat women and men with the same level of professionalism.

What action can I take?

Microaggression towards you

- Decide if you want to engage:
 - If I respond, could my physical safety be in danger? Might the person become defensive and argumentative? How will this affect my relationship with this person?
 - If I don’t respond, will I regret not saying something? Will that convey that I accept this behavior/language?
- Clarify: “What do you mean by that?” “How have you come to think that?”
- Separate intent from impact with an “I” statement “You may not be aware but when you.....I was.....”

Microaggression by you or others

- “Did I say/do something hurtful?”
- Own your mistake, if appropriate
- Share your own learning “I used to say that too but then I learned...”