

Micro- aggressions

Recognise. Respond. Repair.

A short guide to recognising and addressing everyday exclusion at work.



*"Micro does not mean small.
Small comments, repeated over time,
change how safe a workplace feels."*

What are microaggressions

Microaggressions are brief, everyday comments or behaviours that communicate negative or dismissive messages to people based on their race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, class, or other marginalised identities.

They are often unintentional, but that does not make them harmless. Individually they seem minor. Repeated over time, they erode psychological safety, increase stress, lower engagement, and drive people out of organisations.

Three forms microaggressions take

- Verbal: 'You're so articulate,' 'Where are you really from?'
- Behavioural: clutching your bag when a Black colleague walks by, speaking slowly to someone with an accent.
- Environmental: all leadership photos showing only white men, lack of accessible facilities, no women's toilets on a set.

Why 'micro' does not mean small

- Each individual incident feels minor, but the cumulative impact is serious.
- Erosion of psychological safety and trust.
- Increased stress, anxiety, and burnout.
- Lower performance and engagement.
- Higher turnover among minoritised staff.

Common microaggressions at work

You do not need to memorise a list, but recognising patterns makes them easier to name when they happen. Here are examples across different categories.

Race and ethnicity

- 'Where are you really from?' (implies you do not belong)
- 'You speak English so well!' (assumes English is not your first language)
- 'You're so articulate' (implies low expectations based on race)
- Mispronouncing or refusing to learn someone's name
- Assuming someone's role based on their race (e.g. assuming the Black person is support staff, not the consultant)
- 'I don't see colour' (dismisses lived experience of racism)

Gender

- Talking over women in meetings or attributing their ideas to men
- 'You're too emotional' or 'too aggressive' (gendered double standards)
- Commenting on appearance, clothing, or body
- Assuming women will take notes, organise events, or do emotional labour
- 'That's not very ladylike' or 'man up'

Class and accent

- Mocking or mimicking regional or working-class accents
- Assumptions about someone's education or background based on how they speak
- 'You don't sound Irish' or 'you sound too Dublin'

Disability

- 'You don't look disabled'
- Speaking to a colleague or support person instead of the disabled person directly
- 'I wish I could work from home like you' (dismissing access needs)
- Assuming someone cannot do a task without asking

Sexual orientation and gender identity

- 'That's so gay' as an insult
- Assuming everyone is heterosexual or cisgender
- Invasive questions about someone's body, transition, or relationships
- 'You don't look gay' or 'you don't look trans'

If you experience a microaggression

You do not owe anyone an explanation or education. You have options, and doing nothing in the moment is also valid.

Name it in the moment (if you feel safe)**RESPONSE PHRASES**

- › *"That comment didn't land well."*
- › *"Can you explain what you meant by that?"*
- › *"I'd prefer if you didn't say things like that."*
- › *"That's not okay with me."*

Redirect or deflect

REDIRECT PHRASES

- › *“Let’s focus on the work.”*
- › *“I don’t think that’s relevant here.”*
- › *“Anyway, back to the agenda.”*

Address it later, privately

FOLLOW-UP PHRASES

- › *“I wanted to follow up on what you said earlier. Here’s how it came across.”*
- › *“I don’t think you meant harm, but that phrase has a history that makes it uncomfortable for me.”*
- › *“Can we talk about the comment from the meeting? I’ve been thinking about it.”*

Doing nothing is also valid

- Sometimes you do not have the energy, the safety, or the relationship.
- You are not obligated to fix other people’s behaviour, especially when you are the one harmed.
- Choosing not to respond is a legitimate option. It does not mean you accept what happened.

If you witness a microaggression

Silence signals that the behaviour is acceptable. You do not need the perfect words. You just need to break the pattern.

Interrupt what is happening

INTERRUPT PHRASES

- › *“Let’s pause there. That didn’t sound right.”*
- › *“I’m not sure that’s the best way to say that.”*
- › *“Can we unpack what you just said?”*
- › *“Hold on, I want to check that I heard that right.”*

Redirect attention to the person affected

REDIRECT PHRASES

- › *“I want to hear what [name] was saying.”*
- › *“[Name], do you want to respond to that?”*
- › *“Let’s come back to [name]’s point.”*

Follow up privately

Two conversations worth having

- Check in with the person affected: 'Are you okay? Do you want to talk about what happened?'
- Address the person who caused harm (if you have the relationship): 'I don't think you meant harm, but here's how that came across.'
- See the Bystander Response Phrases guide for more detailed language.

If you said something harmful

It happens. Everyone says things they later regret. What matters is what you do next. Repair does not require a dramatic conversation. It requires changed behaviour.

What not to do

- Get defensive ('I didn't mean it that way').
- Centre your intent over their impact ('But I have Black friends').
- Demand they educate you or forgive you on the spot.
- Make it about your feelings ('Now I feel terrible').

The REPAIR framework

A simple framework for responding well when you have caused harm.



Recognise

Acknowledge the harm without minimising or deflecting.



Engage

Listen to how it affected them. Do not interrupt or explain yourself.



Pause

Do not rush to justify. Sit with the discomfort for a moment.



Apologise

A simple, clear apology. No 'I'm sorry you feel that way.'



Improve

Commit to doing better. Be specific about what you will change.



Rebuild trust

Follow through over time. Change is shown through consistent behaviour.

What organisations can do

Microaggressions thrive in cultures where there is no accountability, reporting routes are not trusted, and leadership does not model inclusive behaviour. Training on its own does not fix this. Systems do.

Five things that actually reduce microaggressions

- Train managers to recognise and respond to microaggressions, not just general diversity awareness.
- Strengthen reporting routes so people can raise concerns without fear of retaliation.
- Hold people accountable when microaggressions are reported: consistent, proportionate consequences.
- Model inclusive behaviour at leadership level: language, decision-making, who gets heard.
- Create space for repair, not just punishment. How do you rebuild trust after harm?

A final note

Microaggressions are not a matter of oversensitivity or political correctness. They are small signals, repeated over time, that tell people they do not fully belong. They compound. They drive people out.

The good news is that the same small signals, applied differently, build inclusion. Every conversation you handle well, every moment you choose to speak up or check in, is a vote for the culture you want to work in.

"Impact matters more than intent. You can cause harm without meaning to, and you can repair it without being perfect. What matters is what you do next."

About PhoenixRize Consulting

- I'm Adaku Oliver-Nnona, founder of PhoenixRize Consulting.
- I help organisations build workplaces where people are treated fairly, concerns are heard, and leaders are held accountable.
- My work spans culture risk advisory, anti-racism and bystander intervention programmes, inclusive leadership, and organisational culture change.
- To discuss how I can support your organisation, get in touch via phoenixrize.ie.

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