



---

# **A Journey to Now: Beginning the Conversation on Implicit Bias and Microaggression**

**Gregory P. Conyers**

Director of Diversity  
State Bar of Michigan

# Definition of Microaggressions

“brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color,”

Source: Elizabeth Gehrman ,Harvard Correspondent , The Harvard Gazette November 20, 2019

# Impact of Microaggressions

“microaggressions contribute to an onslaught of injuries to the psyche that may seem unrelenting and can result in everything from depression, fatigue, and anger to physical ailments such as chronic infections, thyroid problems, and high blood pressure.

Source: Elizabeth Gehrman ,Harvard Correspondent , The Harvard Gazette November 20, 2019

# Examples of Microaggressions

“You’re so articulate”

“You’re transgender? Wow, you don't look like it at all”

“Oh, sorry, wrong person”

“Oh you’re gay? You should meet my friend Ann. She’s gay, too!”

“My boss is crazy”

“Where are you actually from?”

“The way you’ve overcome your disability is so inspiring”

Source: Ward, Marguerite, and Rachel Premack. “What Is a Microaggression? 14 Things People Think Are Fine to Say at Work – but Are Actually Racist, Sexist, or Offensive.” Business Insider, July 24, 2020.

# Examples of Microaggressions

“Your name is so hard to pronounce”

“I think you’re in the wrong room — this is the programmers’ meeting”

“Do you even know what Snapchat is?”

“Are you an intern? You look so young!”

“Is that your real hair?”

(Interrupting) “Well, actually, I think...”

“Why do you wear that?”

Source: Ward, Marguerite, and Rachel Premack. “What Is a Microaggression? 14 Things People Think Are Fine to Say at Work – but Are Actually Racist, Sexist, or Offensive.” Business Insider, July 24, 2020.

What do you do  
when it happens?

Three options  
(Four if you count losing it!)

## ***Option # 1 Let it go.***

They can be emotionally draining to confront.

**Risk:** Silence places an emotional tax on the receiver who is left

- Wondering what happened and why,
- Questioning their right to feel offended,
- Reinforcing beliefs that they are not safe from identity devaluation at work.

## ***Option #2 Respond immediately.***

This allows the transgression to be called out and its impact explained while the details of the incident are fresh. Immediacy is an important component of correcting bad behavior.

**Risk:** The perpetrator might get defensive, leaving the target feeling like they

- Somehow “lost control,”
- Did not show up as their best self,
- Will be labeled an overly sensitive whiner, a trouble-maker, or the stereotypical angry fill in the blank \_



### ***Option #3 Respond later.***

Explain why the microaggression was offensive. Have a follow-up conversation helping the person who committed the microaggression to first recall it and then to appreciate its impact.

**Risk** : The time lag.

- Employee bringing it up might be deemed petty — like someone who has been harboring resentment or holding on to “little things”
- The other party, having “meant no harm,” has moved on.

**How do you respond?**

## Discern

- Determine how much of an investment you want to make in addressing the microaggression. Consider: The importance of the issue and the relationship.

## Disarm

- If you choose to confront a microaggression, be prepared to disarm the person who committed it. Explain that the conversation might get uncomfortable for them but that what they just said or did was uncomfortable for you.

*When and How to Respond to Microaggressions* Ella F. Washington, Alison Hall Birch and Laura Morgan Roberts; Harvard Business Review, July 03, 2020

## **Defy**

- Challenge the perpetrator to clarify their statement or action.
- Ask“ how do you mean that?”
- Acknowledge that you accept their intentions to be as they stated
- Reframe the conversation around the impact of the microaggression.
- Explain how you initially interpreted it and why.

## **Decide**

- You control what this incident will mean for your life and your work
- There are consequences to speaking up and to remaining silent.
- Only you can determine which holds more weight for you in any specific situation.

*Source: Ella F. Washington, Alison Hall Birch and Laura Morgan Roberts “When and How to Respond to Microaggressions”; Harvard Business Review, July 03, 2020*