Microaggressions: Sometimes the Little Things Hurt the Most

By Jennifer S. Rubain and Maryann McKenzie

In the 2013 report State of the American Workplace: Employee Engagement Insights for U.S. Business Leaders, Gallup Chairman and CEO Jim Clifton states, “Of the approximately 100 million people in America who hold full-time jobs, 30 million are engaged and inspired at work, so we can assume they have a great boss. At the other end of the spectrum are roughly 20 million employees who are actively disengaged. These employees … roam the halls spreading discontent. The other 50 million American workers are not engaged. They’re just kind of present, but not inspired by their work or their managers.”

Employee engagement goes beyond job satisfaction or employee happiness and speaks to a higher level of emotional commitment to the organization. It is common knowledge that an engaged employee is a more productive employee, so how can managers cultivate employee engagement? What builds engagement and, as a corollary, what serves to erode it? Common sense tells us that employees are looking for meaningful work that's fairly compensated, but we also need to consider the role that diversity and inclusion plays in creating a humane workplace, and one that supports the “whole person.”

What Are Microaggressions?

Fifty years have passed since the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex and national origin. Title VII of this law greatly advanced social change by creating workplace opportunities for those traditionally left behind. We have certainly come a long way over the past five decades, but some have suggested that while bias has become less overt, it still manages to manifest itself in ways, often unconscious, that continue to have a negative impact.

For those of us who handle discrimination complaints, we know that people often complain about comments or actions from supervisors or peers that do not rise to the level of illegal discrimination, but nonetheless make the receiver feel devalued and unappreciated and seem to communicate unconscious biases. Such behaviors have been referred to as “microaggressions.” In his article “Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life” published in The American Psychologist in 2007, Professor Derald Wing Sue of Columbia’s Teachers College describes microaggressions as brief and commonplace verbal, behavioral or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative slights and insults.

What’s the Harm?

Since the term “microaggression” seeped into the vernacular a few years ago, there has been some backlash. Some have likened it to political correctness, while others have suggested that microaggressions are not a big deal since everyone experiences small slights or indignities at one time or another.

However, there is a growing body of research that shows that internalized hurt and humiliation may result from these encounters. The effects of microaggressions are cumulative, impacting one’s morale and self-worth and potentially leading to anxiety, shame, depression and other
health issues, all of which may result in lack of engagement, absenteeism, lost productivity and turnover in the workplace. Often, the person communicating the microaggression perceives it as a compliment (for example, “Where are you from? Your English is perfect!”), which can further complicate the receiver’s response – “Should I ignore it? After all, it wasn’t meant to be derogatory or negative. Or should I address it? It did feel demeaning and maybe addressing it will establish an environment of mutual respect.”

Awareness of the overall negative effects of microaggressions has become increasingly important, especially as the workforce becomes more diverse. To promote an atmosphere of inclusion where all people feel valued for their contributions, it is important that HR and diversity professionals become familiar with the occurrence of microaggressions so that we can help foster a workplace where people feel valued and appreciated. As Professor Nancy Hopkins from MIT stated at the 2014 Boston University commencement address, “If you asked me to name the greatest discoveries of the past 50 years, alongside things like the internet and the Higgs particle, I would include the discovery of unconscious biases and the extent to which stereotypes about gender, race, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status and age deprive people of equal opportunity in the workplace and equal justice in society.”

**A Respectful Environment Makes for Engaged Employees**

It has been long known that an engaged employee is also a high-performing, productive worker. Positive attributes of an engaged employee include motivation, commitment, enthusiasm and diligence, all of which serve to drive effective teamwork. So, how can we help our managers build and sustain employee engagement?

An article in the June 1, 2014, *New York Times* addressed this topic. Titled “Why You Hate Work,” the authors, Tony Schwartz of The Energy Project and Professor Christine Porath of Georgetown University’s McDonough School of Business, noted that “… the way people feel at work profoundly influences how they perform.” Their findings were based on a partnership with the *Harvard Business Review* that surveyed more than 20,500 workers across a range of industries. Elaborating on their results, they noted that a total of four core needs were essential in order to deepen employee engagement. These are:

- **Renewal**: when breaks become an established norm, employees are more focused
- **Value**: feeling cared for by one’s supervisor
- **Focus**: doing one thing at a time
- **Purpose**: meaningful work promotes job satisfaction

And while compensation is certainly important, Schwartz and Porath suggest that when an employer is able to better meet the human-centered needs of its staff, it stands to reap enormous benefits in the way of a dedicated, trusting and loyal workforce. Engaged employees do more work in less time. In addition, current employees will become an organization’s best recruiters, spreading the word about the positive features of their work environment.

When trust exists, behaviors change for the better, and atmosphere improves. The goal is to replace microaggressions with microaffirmations, subtle acknowledgements of a person’s value and accomplishments. An employee who feels slighted and demeaned is not putting forth his or
her best effort for the employer. From an HR perspective, addressing microaggressions makes good business sense.

**How to Foster an Inclusive Environment That Supports Engagement**

How can we become agents for positive change in our workplace? As an advisor to managers, HR pros are uniquely positioned to provide advice and guidance. So, what can we do to foster an inclusive environment that supports engagement?

Here are some effective practices:

1. **Set the tone.** Our words do have consequences. It pays to be vigilant and sensitive to be sure that we are not making statements that may be viewed as microaggressions.

2. **Avoid assumptions** based on race, gender, nationality, socio-economic status, sexual orientation and other “labels.”

3. **Include people** with different experiences, backgrounds and perspectives on your work teams, including search committees.

4. **Share information.** Be as transparent with the policies and procedures in your unit.

5. **Make it clear** that there is no tolerance for gender, racial, religious or LGBT slurs. If you hear someone making an offensive comment, speak up. Explain why the language used is not acceptable. Attempt to peel away the “I was just joking” response.

6. **Don’t assume** that if a person from a targeted group is silent, this means the negative remark is OK.

7. **Try not to be judgmental,** and always challenge your own assumptions.

8. **Be an active listener.**

9. **Educate yourself about the culture/customs/lifestyle of others** by attending events, programs or discussion groups. As our world becomes more global, increase your cultural competency.

**Teachable Moments**

At some point in our lives, we’ve all experienced an insensitive comment or exclusionary practice. Especially in the higher education workplace, these expressions of unconscious bias offer teachable moments that underscore our commitment to the core values of diversity, equity and inclusion. As Daniel Goleman stated in his classic book *Emotional Intelligence*, “The simple act of naming a bias or objecting to it on the spot establishes a social atmosphere that discourages it. Saying nothing serves to condone it.”

Acknowledging that microaggressions exist and learning how to confront them can help us become active diversity and inclusion allies on behalf of our colleagues. As HR professionals, it
is our responsibility to help create a workplace that values the contributions, supports the ideas, congratulates the successes, and offers opportunities for professional development and growth for all of our employees.

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Examples of Microaggressions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Message</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am not homophobic – I have gay friends, and I love Project Runway!</td>
<td>I am immune to homophobia because I have LGBT friends and/or associate with mainstream stereotypes of queerness.</td>
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<tr>
<td>We all know she got hired because she is a woman! (often said in a male-dominated field)</td>
<td>Women are not as qualified as male candidates; gender was used as a way to get ahead.</td>
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<td>An African American professor is mistaken for a service worker.</td>
<td>People of color are not as successful as whites; it’s unlikely they would occupy a high-status position.</td>
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<td>I’m not sure if we should hire a blind person for this job – there is no way she could do as well as a normal person.</td>
<td>People with disabilities are unable to perform job duties at the same level as able-bodied individuals. There are no accommodations, such as adaptive technology, that could mitigate any performance concerns.</td>
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Adapted from http://www.iamsafezone.com/resources/Ally_Handouts_Microaggressions_Table.pdf