

Race

## **You've Been Called Out for a Microaggression. What Do You Do?**

by Rebecca Knight

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**Summary.** As a person who wants to be an ally to members of marginalized groups, how should you respond after a colleague calls you out for committing a microaggression? First, make sure the other person feels heard. Replace your instinctive defensiveness with curiosity and... [more](#)

It was a throwaway comment, and you were unaware that it was demeaning. But now that a colleague has brought the slight to your attention, you realize what you said was offensive. As a person who wants to be a good ally to your colleagues of color and members of underrepresented groups, how do you apologize after you've

committed a microaggression? How and when should you try to make amends? And what's the best way to ensure that you do better in the future?

## **What the Experts Say**

Microaggressions are the everyday indignities and insults that members of marginalized groups endure in their routine interactions with people in all walks of life. In the workplace, these “subtle acts of exclusion” come in many forms, says Tiffany Jana, founder and CEO of TMI Consulting and the co-author of *Overcoming Bias: Building Authentic Relationships Across Differences*. They include backhanded compliments (a white manager telling an African American employee that, “She’s very articulate”; a group of co-workers jokingly ribbing a Latino executive that, “He’s a diversity hire”) and stereotypical assumptions (a male colleague asking his female peer to take notes and order lunch for the team).

These remarks and behaviors “happen casually and often without any harm intended,” says Jana, but they offer a clear demonstration “that the initiator harbors unconscious bias.” Meanwhile, the person on the receiving end who belongs to a group that’s discriminated against — be it because of their race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or religion — is often left to suffer in silence.

This is starting to change, however. Amidst a national conversation on race and equality, “we are increasingly holding people accountable,” says Jana. The change has critical implications for managers who “care about creating an inclusive team and workplace,” says Lily Zheng, a diversity consultant and the co-author of *Gender Ambiguity in the Workplace: Transgender and Gender-Diverse Discrimination*.

If you’ve been called out for committing a microaggression you need to respond with compassion, concern, and humility. “You want people to feel respected, so you need to walk the talk,” Zheng says. “It’s important to get this right.” Here are some tips.

## **Take a breath.**

Being called out for a microaggression does not feel good. You may experience a range of emotions — “stress, embarrassment, defensiveness, and your heart rate may even go up,” says Zheng. This is normal. But do not let these sensations rule how you react. Instead, “take a breath.” Calm yourself. Understand that while you may have made a mistake, it doesn’t mean you’re a bad person. In these circumstances, people often fall prey to the fundamental attribution error — a “tendency to believe that things happen because of who we are as people rather than the situation,” says Zheng. In other words, you can still be “a good person with positive intentions, who slipped up.”

And there’s an upside to being called out for a microaggression: It’s an indication of trust. The person who labeled your comment believes that you can be better, says Jana. “If they don’t think you’re capable of, or interested in, evolving they would not have wasted their breath.”

### **Don’t make it about you.**

While being called out for a microaggression may be awkward and uncomfortable, you don’t want to get defensive. “You must not make it about you,” says Jana. “When a human being tells you that they have been harmed by your words or actions, you need to focus on the injured party.” It can be helpful to remember that “every callout has an entire history’s worth of unsaid context behind it,” says Zheng. “When someone says, ‘What you said hurt me,’ they’re saying, ‘You have hurt me in the way that people have hurt me, and people like me, in the past.’” In other words, your remark was not “just one interpersonal interaction.” Rather it carried centuries’ worth of discrimination, cruelty, and oppression. “And the weight of historical oppression is very heavy,” says Zheng.

### **Listen.**

Your first priority is to make sure the other person feels heard, says Jana. As difficult as it may be to receive the criticism, “they are taking a risk by putting themselves on the line.” Listen to what they say with an open heart and an open mind. Be grateful. “It is a deeply sacred gift for someone to reflect back to you how you’re showing up in the

world and to help you become more evolved,” explains Jana. Express appreciation, and then “follow the other person’s lead,” says Zheng. Sometimes the individual calling you out may “want to explain to you all the ways that what you said was harmful and give you a history lesson to go along with it,” she says. Other times, all they may reveal is, “Don’t say that word.”

### **Sincerely apologize.**

Next, says Jana, you need to “replace your instinctive defensiveness with curiosity and empathy” and offer a genuine apology. According to Zheng, your apology must include three elements: “You must address the harmful comment, acknowledge the impact it had, and commit to doing better.”

Start by saying something like, “Thank you for sharing that with me. It’s hard to hear. And I appreciate you trust me enough to share this feedback.” Then say, “I am sorry that what I said and did was offensive.”

Your apology must be sincere. “Don’t say, ‘I am sorry if you felt offended.’ The insertion of the ‘if’ makes it seem like you’re humoring them,” says Zheng. Finally, say, “I care a lot about creating an inclusive workplace, and I want to improve.” Depending on your relationship with this colleague, you might also ask for a suggestion on how to be better in future situations. Zheng suggests saying something like, “If you can, and if you’re willing, can you share a recommendation for how I could have said it differently?”

### **And don’t overdo it.**

Upon being called out for an offensive remark, some people have a tendency to over-apologize, says Zheng. “They go on and on, saying things like: ‘I am so sorry. I feel so terrible. I am not a racist. What must you think of me?’” But these histrionics do not help, and in fact, they contribute to the insult. “You are flexing your power by [asking] this employee to take care of you,” she says. It’s not your colleague’s job to assuage your guilt, and make you feel better about the situation. This shouldn’t become “a pity party,” adds Jana.

## **How to respond when you're called out publicly**

All of the above steps become much harder if the conversation is happening in front of others. According to Zheng, most callouts for microaggressions tend to be private interactions because of the sensitive subject matters. That said, if your colleague draws attention to your behavior in a public setting, it's likely because "they don't feel psychologically safe with you" or "they're at the end of their rope," Zheng says.

In situations like these, tread carefully. "First, pause. Then say, 'Thank you for sharing that feedback. I am not going to use that word in the future,'" Zheng advises. Keep your response short and non-defensive. Later, "message the person privately and go through the same steps of acknowledging the hurtful comment, recognizing the impact it had, and committing to doing better," she says. You don't want to do this part of process "publicly because it is performative."

### **Seek to understand on your own time.**

In the event that you don't quite grasp how what you said or did was prejudiced and hurtful, do not force your colleague into a drawn-out conversation or try to persuade them of your benign intent, says Jana. Instead, "Google it or ask other people" to help you understand. Importantly, adds Zheng, "that research needs to happen on your own time." Remember, this person didn't "commit to becoming your teacher," and so you need to "treat this as your own learning opportunity," she says.

### **Consider following up**

"If you went on a hike with someone and they tripped and hurt themselves, you would follow up with them later to express your genuine concern for their wellbeing,"— particularly if their fall was due to your negligence, says Jana. The same should hold true for times "when you have been the cause of someone's emotional pain."

After a bit of time has passed, Jana recommends reaching out to let your colleague to let them "know that you care" and that you're "grateful that they were vulnerable with you." Essentially you're

saying: “Your intervention worked. I could have gone through the world blind to that and I understand a bit more now. Thank you for helping me grow.”

But Zheng recommends proceeding with caution. When your research sparks burning revelation about your biases and you have an urge to make further amends, she says you need to “interrogate your own feelings.” Ask yourself: What am I looking for? A pat on the back? Validation? She says that the best way course of action is not to rehash the incident but rather to “take steps to make your colleague feel more respected.”

### **Keep working on it**

Finally, recognize that becoming a better, open-minded, anti-racist, anti-sexist person is hard work. “You’re doing the best you can; you’re human and fallible; and you’re going to mess up from time to time,” says Jana. “Rarely does one conversation erase a lifetime of programming.”

The important thing is to “commit to opening your eyes and be willing to course correct at every opportunity” and to have “grace for yourself and grace for others,” says Jana. Let your team know that this is a priority for you, adds Zheng. Say, “In the future I am going to work on this, and if you can, please keep holding me accountable.”

### **Principles to Remember**

Do

- Make the other person feel heard and follow their lead in the conversation.
- Offer a genuine apology that acknowledges the impact and harm your comment caused.
- Keep striving to be better. It requires grace, humility, and commitment.

Don't

- Fall prey to the fundamental attribution error. You can still be a good, well-intentioned person who said something offensive.

- Make the conversation about you. Instead, express gratitude for your colleague's trust and belief that you're capable of evolving.
- Overdo your apology by laying on your privileged guilt. Your apology should be sincere.

### **Advice in Practice**

#### **Case Study #1: Be grateful for your colleague's courage and listen to what they say.**

Steve Waters, a social entrepreneur, says he has long strived to create an equitable, inclusive, and fair workplace. "Diversity and social justice are really important to me," he says. "And I consider myself to be very aware of how that comes across in my language."

Recently, however, he was called out by a female employee — we'll call her Sarah — for committing a microaggression. "I often use the greeting, 'Hey guys,' which I view as an easygoing way to greet a group of people," he says. "It didn't even occur to me that this was hurtful, and I was quite surprised when my colleague brought it up."

He admits that at first, he was confused. But he listened carefully to what his colleague was telling him. "Sarah explained that she came from the tech startup world, where sexism is rampant, and since 'guys' literally means men, it is often used as a subtle, or not-so-subtle, way of minimizing the women in the room."

Sarah explained that by addressing the group, which was predominantly men, as "guys," he was excluding her. Steve felt terrible. "This wasn't a conscious or purposeful effort to minimize her. Sarah is definitely an equally valued member of the team," he says.

But he knew that this incident wasn't about him. Rather, it was about making sure Sarah felt heard and understood.

Steve immediately thanked Sarah for bringing the comment to his attention. "I also let her know that I understood the impact of what I had said and because of that, I would no longer use that term. I apologized for using language that made her feel minimized," he says.

The end result was positive. Sarah thanked Steve for listening and for being open to change. And Steve learned a key lesson. “Just because something isn’t offensive to you based on your life experience, it doesn’t mean it isn’t or can’t be hurtful to someone else,” he says. “If a colleague has the courage to tell you they feel minimized, take the time to really listen to what their experience is.”

### **Case Study #2: Commit to doing better – and then follow through on that promise**

Jesse Silkoff, founder of MyRoofingPal, which helps customers find local contractors, says that being called out for a mistake that “you didn’t even realize you were making” feels awful.

“However, as a leader, you have to make sure you set the standard of how to make it right,” he says. “In the case of using a microaggression, taking responsibility for the mistake is critical.”

Earlier in his career, Jesse, who is white, managed an Indian American colleague who had a name that Jesse had a hard time saying. “After saying it wrong a few times in our initial conversations, I noted that was a very difficult name for me to pronounce correctly,” he says. “I meant it as a light-hearted, offhand remark.”

But Jesse soon realized that his employee took it differently. She grew stiff and lowered her head. She then explained to Jesse that comments like that were hurtful because it made her feel like an outsider.

Jesse felt badly. That was not his intention, but he could see his colleague’s point. “This was very eye-opening to me,” he says. “I realized that I was in the wrong for making such an insensitive comment and not trying harder to work on the pronunciation on my own.”

Jesse knew his apology shouldn’t be about how terrible he felt. He needed to choose his words carefully and express appropriate humility. “No one wants to hear a half-hearted apology when they’ve been slighted,” he says. “I told her that I was wrong, and that I regret what I did. I then promised her that I would do better.”



Jesse learned how to say his colleague's name correctly. And they went on to have a productive working relationship. "Sadly, I'm sure we all make mistakes like this all the time and are never called out on them," he says. "I'm glad this employee took the time to explain why this was hurtful because it was a great opportunity to grow as a leader and human."

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