

How women with disabilities can respond to microaggressions

Lean In Circle Discussion Guide

The
Women
at Work
Collection

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Meeting agenda

approx 90 mins

Member updates

15 mins

Watch video

7 mins

Icebreaker

10 mins

Activities

- Activity 1: Reviewing strategies
- Activity 2: Workshopping responses
- Activity 3: Mitigating the impact

15 mins

15 mins

15 mins

One Action

10 mins

For Circles with only 60 mins, here are suggestions to shorten this agenda:

- Encourage members to watch the video in advance
- Spend 5 mins on member updates
- Spend 10 mins on activity 1 and activity 3

Getting started

Member updates

2 mins or less per member

15-20 mins depending on group size

Go around your Circle and share personal updates. As a general rule, personal updates should be brief and focus on big changes and important decisions in your life. (It's OK not to have one every month!) If you have a One Action update, share that with your Circle.

Watch video

7 mins



“At one point, I had an opportunity to give a presentation at Harvard. My more junior coworkers arrived with me, and people were directing their questions to my junior coworkers. I had to sort of stop them and say, ‘Hey, you can talk to me directly if you have any questions.’”

Nadia Mossburg, senior manager, public sector, Florida, USA (she/her)

“When I was diagnosed with MS, I told some colleagues and they did treat me very differently. Everyone kept questioning whether I could do my job. I was nervous because I was just recently out of law school, not making a ton of money. My default was to suck it up and work harder to prove myself. But with hindsight, I should have said, ‘I’m still the same person, and I’ll let you know if I need help.’”

Kristen Dietz, J.D., policy analyst, Washington, USA (she/her)



Icebreaker

10 mins

Read aloud to the group: I'm going to read a list of some common workplace microaggressions faced by women with disabilities. Raise your hand if this has happened to you:

- Someone questioned your abilities or judged you as less than capable at your job
- Someone treated you like a child
- You were ignored or spoken over in a meeting
- You were left out of social events or meetings due to your disability
- Someone touched your assistive device
- Someone commented disrespectfully about your disability
- Someone talked negatively about people with disabilities like yours
- Someone denied you accommodations or questioned whether you need one
- Someone reacted with distaste or unkindness—or simply shut down the conversation—when you disclosed a disability
- Someone minimized your disability (e.g., saying, “You don’t look like you have [X condition]”)
- Someone used a disability as an insult or criticism (e.g., speculating that someone’s unprofessional behavior is due to autism, OCD, etc.)
- Someone asked an intrusive question related to your disability

Discuss icebreaker

- What did you learn from seeing other people’s responses?
- Did anything surprise you?
- How did you feel about the experiences your fellow Circle members shared?
- Have you experienced any kinds of disrespect at work that aren’t on the list?

Activity 1: Reviewing strategies

15 mins

Read aloud to the group: The kinds of disrespect we just talked about can be a common workplace experience for women with disabilities. Your experiences will vary depending on whether your disability is known to your coworkers, but there are some themes and stereotypes that all of us are likely to experience.

Before we dive into this activity, know that it's always okay to **not** respond to a microaggression. The burden shouldn't always be on women with disabilities to advocate for change. It's fine to just focus on staying safe and taking good care of yourself. But if you do want to respond, research shows it can make you feel more empowered and in control.

Here are the main research-based strategies for responding:

- **State the facts** (e.g., tell someone your job title or qualifications in a simple, direct way and then move the conversation on)
- **Ask a question** that encourages the person to question their assumptions (e.g., researchers recommend asking, "What makes you say that?")
- **Follow up privately** with the person later, so that you have a chance to prepare.

Discuss as a group:

- Which of these responses have you used in real life?
- How effective were they? What was the impact of your response?
- Are there any other types of response to workplace disrespect that you would recommend?
- Which responses do you think would be most helpful to use in the future?
- Which responses do you think would be most helpful to use in the future?

Activity 2: Workshopping responses

15 mins

- Think of time when you experienced a microaggression and wish you'd responded differently—or responded at all.
- Go around the room and have everyone share with the group what happened and what they wish they'd done differently.
 - Then, if you feel comfortable, ask other group members for their advice—what would they say in that situation?



“I’m a wheelchair user, and sometimes colleagues organize events where I can’t access the event space. Or sometimes they don’t even invite me—they’ll say, ‘I didn’t think you could participate, so I didn’t invite you.’ I do my best to advocate for my needs, but it really sucks to be in a workplace, especially where you've been for a while, and you advocate for your needs and they're still overlooked.”

Andraea LaVant, president and founder, consulting firm, California, USA (she/her)

Activity 3: Mitigating the impact

15 mins

- Discuss as a group: How has the experience of workplace microaggressions impacted you?
 - Have your physical and mental health been affected?
- What strategies have helped mitigate the impact (e.g., talking to others, reminding yourself of your worth, basic self-care)?
 - What does self-care in your professional life look like? What does it look like in your personal life?
- Consider setting up a group chat with others in this group to share stories, advice, empathy, and validation (e.g., a Slack channel or WhatsApp group).
 - Research shows there are tremendous mental health benefits in talking to others who share important aspects of your identity about any disrespect you face at work.



“I’m always hoping that if I respond to a disrespectful comment and take the time to educate, it’ll make a difference for the next person with disabilities that they encounter. If you understand the disability rights movement, you realize that there were people before you, but there will also be people after you. It’s helping to pave the way for people after you, changing the world one person at a time.”

Nadia Mossburg, senior manager, public sector, Florida, USA
(she/her)

One Action

10 mins

- Think about one strategy you could use to mitigate the impact of workplace microaggressions in your own life (e.g., self-care or setting up a group chat to share stories).
- Commit to implementing this strategy the next time you experience workplace bias or disrespect.
- Share your commitment with your Circle (spending 1 minute or less per member).
- When you meet next time, you can check in and discuss how well the strategy worked.

Congratulations on a great meeting!

