



An Antidote to Microaggressions? Microvalidations

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You've likely taken part in a workplace training that describes how to recognize and avoid microaggressions. These are subtle acts of exclusion that negatively impact learning, problem-solving, and overall emotional well-being for workers who belong to a historically underrepresented or devalued group — whether because of race, gender, sexual orientation, or other identity. In our work as leadership and DEI academics, practitioners, and advisors, we've found that avoiding committing microaggressions is not enough; to remedy the harm they cause, we need to counteract them. To do this, we propose an additional tool: Microvalidations. These are small, positive actions that encourage or affirm.

Why We Need Microvalidations

In addition to the microaggressions and other forms of discrimination they experience, individuals from marginalized groups typically experience a deficit of positive interactions relative to their majority-group counterparts. Beginning in preschool, for example, Black and brown children receive far fewer compliments and more disciplinary action than their white peers, and throughout their formative school years, teachers maintain lower expectations of them and are less likely to provide developmental feedback on their assignments.

This carries over to the workplace as well. Research shows that while leaders are willing to affirm the potential of early-career workers who belong to a majority group (racial or otherwise), workers from historically underrepresented groups are often subject to more scrutiny and less recognition of demonstrated success and are often given less-helpful performance feedback. As a result, members of marginalized groups must wait longer to reach management and executive levels (if promoted at all), have lower-

quality relationships with managers and supervisors, and experience higher levels of work-related stress and adverse health outcomes as consequences of identity-based discrimination.

Small, Positive Acts Make a Big Difference

To address this imbalance and build positive relationships in the workplace, it's not enough to simply eliminate negative interactions — we also need to encourage positive ones.

Microaggressions and microvalidations exist on the opposite ends of a spectrum of small behaviors that can make people feel like either outsiders or insiders of a particular group. Their power lies in their subtlety. Microaggressions, for example, are often dismissed or ignored by both perpetrators and witnesses, leading those on the receiving end to often feel alienated, withdraw, and face chronic stress.

Research suggests that there's a flip side of the coin: Microvalidations. These are equally subtle but powerful actions or language that demonstrate affirmation, encouragement, and belief in a person's potential. They can include gestures as simple as acknowledging and affirming someone's experience of a microaggression, or giving encouraging feedback and sincere compliments.

Twenty years of research from the Center for Positive Organizations, Gallup Institute, and others shows that highlighting employees' strengths and contributions helps them to grow stronger, perform better, and become more engaged, and be happier, healthier, and more connected. And one of us (Laura) has seen firsthand that when her executive coaching clients feel like they aren't living up to their potential, others' brief, positive reflections on their work and actions can help them course correct.

For instance, her client Marcus,* a Black, mid-career academic, struggled with gaining influence at work. He had a passion for real-world impact, but was given feedback that he should be spending less time in practitioner conferences than high-level

academic ones. His opportunities to take on more leadership responsibilities within higher education dwindled.

But during his speaking engagements on and off campus, Marcus's audience greeted him enthusiastically and shared the ways his perspective changed their understanding of the concepts. Hosts introduced him by citing his unique research contributions. These reflections on Marcus's strengths helped him identify that he was a strong public speaker, excelled at connecting with his community, and had a knack for translating research into practice. These insights and the validation they provided prompted Marcus to make a career shift; he is now a highly sought-after consultant to some of the world's largest organizations.

Microvalidations can be equally influential for new or more junior employees. Valerie,* a participant in one of Laura's executive education courses, started a new job and found herself battling self-doubt while struggling with the company's procedures and software. Valerie was one of few women on her engineering project team, and she worried about confirming negative gender stereotypes about being ill equipped to do a technical job. But when she eventually shared her concerns with her manager, they affirmed her effort and ability to succeed at new tasks, made her feel like it was normal for learning new technologies to take time, and encouraged her to stay engaged and focused on learning. These microvalidations helped give Valerie confidence that she belonged at the company and was doing a good job. As a result, she became more proactive with seeking information, guidance, and feedback from other teammates and managers, further accelerating her performance.

Five Microvalidations Anyone Can Use

From our work, we've identified five microvalidations that you can use to affirm your colleagues. To members of dominant groups, many of these may seem like simple courtesy. But, as we've seen, they're extended more rarely to those from historically marginalized groups. When they are, we believe they can aid in counteracting longstanding praise deficits.

Acknowledge Presence

Women of all racial/ethnic backgrounds and Black and brown men are often assumed to be of lower status in a variety of settings and are treated accordingly: When they enter a room or speak, they are often greeted with silence, not given full attention, or are interrupted.

Instead, show your interest and respect when someone enters the room. Give a nod, a warm smile, or a greeting. In many cultures, simply greeting someone by name and making eye contact with them signal positive regard. When someone is speaking, give them your full attention — put your phone away, close your laptop, or if it's a virtual meeting, close out of other distractions on your computer. Even if you think you generally do these things, become more aware of how equitably you deploy these gestures. This will make others feel valued.

Validate Identity

People often navigate the world at the intersection of multiple identities — white person, woman, parent, gay, CEO — all of which are important parts of how they see themselves and would like to be seen by others. But marginalized identities are often dismissed or forcibly minimized or reinterpreted by others: Someone may assume that a woman's spouse is a man, ignoring the fact that she is gay, for example; or someone may give a colleague a nickname if they find their name difficult to pronounce.

Refer to people in a way that is in line with how they think of themselves. Call people by their preferred names; don't use unsolicited nicknames or anglicize names that are less familiar or hard for you to pronounce. Respect people's gender identities by ensuring you are aware of and utilize their preferred pronouns. Be open to learning about people's backgrounds and identity stories and acknowledge their experiences rather than trying to correct them if they don't seem to comport with yours. These microvalidations help people feel seen, known, and understood.

Voice Your Appreciation for Everyone's Contributions

Share directly with your colleagues how they've made important contributions to work tasks, influenced decision-making processes favorably, or helped to build continuity within a team. Do this in real time, even — especially — when a person expresses dissent. This signals that everyone's perspective is welcome and valued. Similarly, highlight these achievements and accomplishments to other members of the organization, whether the individual is present or not. Harvard public policy professor Iris Bohnet refers to this as “micro-sponsorship.” (But beware: Don't compliment the person for traits that should be table stakes — more on this in the next section!)

And if you think you do this already, check again. We tend to recognize and sponsor colleagues who remind us of ourselves. That means that marginalized and underrepresented people's contributions at work are often overlooked, undervalued, and under-credited. This can result in feelings of isolation and heightened performance pressure, along with a fear of retribution if they express dissent — all anathema to authentic engagement, job satisfaction, and performance.

Hold People to High Standards

People in non-dominant groups are often held to lower standards in subtle ways: They are steered towards lower-level tasks; their work is micromanaged; and they are given feedback based on negative group stereotypes. These microaggressions can seed doubts about their skills and potential.

Complimenting someone based on low expectations associated with a stereotype falls into this category as well. For example, take a manager praising an Asian American employee for speaking English well or telling a Black employee that they are “so articulate,” revealing an assumption that they were born abroad or are unintelligent or ineloquent, respectively. Or take a woman being given praise for a feminized leadership attribute like caring rather than her technical skills, playing into a stereotype that she has more of the former than the latter. Both the employees and the leader are being praised in a way that indicates that someone didn't expect much from them professionally.

Instead, hold your team to high standards and make it clear that you expect they can meet them. Praise employees for actual achievements. And don't shy away from giving your colleagues in traditionally marginalized groups challenging assignments, while providing necessary resources and developmental feedback to enable success. Research shows that students from racial minority groups perform better when mentors make it clear that they're being held to high standards and are assured of their ability to meet them, as opposed to being held to lower standards.

Affirm Leadership Potential and Status

Non-prototypical leaders (in other words, non-white, non-male leaders) often experience contested authority, which means that people reject and challenge their leadership ability, decisions, and potential. Thus emerging leaders in marginalized groups often aren't given opportunities they need to develop, and established leaders aren't granted the respect they deserve.

Express that you have confidence in new leaders' ability to rise to leadership challenges; if that emerging leader belongs to an underrepresented group, this is even more critical. Explicitly acknowledge the challenges they may have faced as a marginalized member of your organization. Make introductions to key contacts and provide them with coaching, encouragement, and tangible support to succeed in leadership assignments. Be proactive in looping leaders from diverse backgrounds into discussions that fall within their scope of responsibility and expertise, and intervene when they are being left out.

Finally, use leaders' formal titles in public settings as appropriate. For example, many Black and brown professionals prefer to be addressed by their titles (Dr., Professor, Reverend) as an act of respect that was not afforded to them by many in the U.S. until 50 years ago.

These efforts can help counteract the ongoing invalidations that marginalized leaders have faced at work.

Microvalidations don't offer a one-size-fits-all, easy fix. Different microvalidations will be affirming for different people and in different circumstances, so it's important to know your audience and context. Moreover, we tend to favor memories of negative words, encounters, and emotions, so an occasional microvalidation won't assuage the cumulative effects of microaggressions that many workers face on an ongoing basis. And, as the saying goes, talk is cheap! It's easy to say nice things, but insincere affirmations, if not backed by supportive actions, will counteract the benefit of any microvalidation, instead adding insult to injury.

But microvalidations remain a powerful tool, particularly in the hands of organizational leaders, whose influence lends legitimacy to their statements and actions. By modeling microvalidations to others at every level in the organization, leaders can make real strides toward dismantling long-established power dynamics and inspiring others to do the same — all while providing positive affirmation within their communities.

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