

## **Your (Little) Actions Matter**

Why did I constantly feel like an outsider at this organization?

Maybe it was the type of announcement that came out fairly often:

“Friday is team shirt day. Everyone should wear their favorite jersey and bring in their favorite tailgate snack.”

Or this one:

“Hiking and Team Building Adventure. Get ready to spend the day hiking hills and working on team challenges.”

Perhaps it was when I was labelled as a “New Yorker”, which probably was code for Jewish.

It could be the way my manager dismissed me from meetings that were important but continued talking with her group of cronies.

Full disclosure here. I’ve only watched one football game in my life, I have no sports jerseys, I only walk long distances if they are in a mall, and I’m from Cleveland.

In my years at this organization, I was given feedback such as, “Don’t wear so much eyeshadow,” and “Don’t answer so many questions because you look like a showoff,” and “Don’t talk in meetings with senior leaders.” In fact, there was a lot of feedback about my style and personality but not about my work.

It was incredibly frustrating because I was deeply invested in my work and really good at it. I think it’s important that I say this because I started to doubt my own abilities. That’s the insidious thing about microaggressions.

This was all a recipe for disengagement. It was a culture that encouraged conformity and quietude, at least for women. Having a woman as the senior leader who constantly put down other women was very discouraging.

I have many other examples of this sort of behavior, but the net result was that I left because I didn’t belong. Was I the wrong gender to be successful? Not enough of a sports fan? Too assertive? Too different?

That’s the problem in situations like these. Microaggressions like I experienced are rarely addressed. They make up a gray area of behaviors that don’t seem overtly exclusionary but become so after someone experiences a few of them.

They also make it clear that some people don’t think you belong. I’ve only experienced this a few times in my life because I look like most people in the US.

But what happens when people look different and act different? If they are a different race or sexual orientation? If they have a different birthplace or differing physical abilities?

Are they deliberately made to feel they belong? Given a mentor who looks like them? Receive prized assignments? Identified as potential leaders and given opportunities? Invited to lunches and after-work activities?

In a culture where microaggressions flourish, discrimination can take root and grow.

I challenge you to look at your culture and how different people are treated. Are you doing anything to help them feel as if they belong? It takes very little effort to be inclusionary.

Here is a list of behaviors to get you started:

- Say hello every time you see them. If you have time, conduct a little small talk.
- Introduce them to your work friends. Learn about the person so that you can give an interesting introduction.
- Invite them for lunch, more than once, and with different groups. Same for after work drinks.
- Take time to learn who they truly are, what is important to them, and how they like to be treated. Listen more than you talk.

And here are some suggestions for your organization as a whole:

- Provide mentors/sponsors to new employees. If possible, assign diverse leaders to diverse employees.
- Make it easy for people to join and attend employee resource groups.
- Assign stretch assignments with other teams to your team members. Give them as much exposure as possible.
- Have a variety of activities for team building. Get input from diverse people—don't be afraid to do something different.
- Create opportunities to celebrate and reward innovation and inclusion.
- Hold meetings where differing opinions are solicited and welcomed.
- Make sure employees can see how their work contributes to business strategy, mission, and vision.
- Encourage leaders to interact with diverse employees, even if it is just to greet them. Not saying hello can be perceived as a microaggression.
- Provide training about diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging.
- Celebrate (or recognize) all holidays.
- Host open conversation about inequality in the workplace and welcome feedback.