

Combating Bias

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about different types of bias and strategies for combating them in order to create an inclusive workplace. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Perception Errors

Social perception is relative, reflecting both positive and negative impressions of people based on a range of factors. Our perceptions of people help us to make decisions and snap judgments, but can also lead to biased or stereotyped conclusions.

Overall, use your **self and social awareness skill** to keep your audience in mind and imagine yourself in their place. This will help you to adjust your writing level and style to their needs, maximizing the likelihood that your message will be understood.

Although often used interchangeably, the terms used to describe common perception errors have different meanings and connotations.

1a. Stereotypes

Stereotypes are oversimplified generalizations about groups of people; stereotypes can be based on race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation—almost any characteristic.

They may be positive (usually when referencing one's own group, such as when women suggest they have better soft skills), but are often negative (usually toward other groups, such as when members of a dominant racial group suggest that a minority racial group is dangerous or less intelligent).



TERM TO KNOW

Stereotype

An oversimplified generalization about a group of people.

1b. Prejudice

Prejudice refers to the beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and attitudes someone holds about a group. A prejudice is not based on one's experiences; instead, it is a prejudgment, originating outside actual experience.

IN CONTEXT

In the 1970 documentary *Eye of the Storm*, Jane Elliott illustrates the way in which prejudice develops. The documentary shows how defining one category of people as superior (in this case, children with blue eyes) results in prejudice against people who are not part of the favored category.



TERM TO KNOW

Prejudice

The beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and attitudes someone holds about a group.

1c. Discrimination

While prejudice refers to biased thinking, **discrimination** consists of actions taken against a group of people. Discrimination can be based on age, race, religion, health, and other indicators.

Discrimination can take many forms, from unfair housing practices to biased hiring systems. Equal Employment Opportunity legislation and enforcement by the EEOC is an attempt to prevent discrimination in the workplace.

However, we can't erase discrimination from our culture just by passing laws to abolish it. As alluded to in the discussion of race, discrimination is a complex issue that relates to educational, economic, legal, and political systems in our society.



TERM TO KNOW

Discrimination

Actions taken against a group of people.

2. Common Bias in the Workplace

When thinking about diversity in the workplace, chances are, most individuals tend to see themselves as good-intentioned, egalitarian, and fair-minded people. They certainly do not go out of their way to denigrate others.

However, believing yourself to be "good" simply because you're not actively engaging in hateful behavior is an overly simplistic and, ultimately, unaware viewpoint because everyone has unconscious bias of some kind. The steps individuals take (or don't take!) to recognize and combat these unconscious biases have a direct impact on the workplace and everyday life.

It is important to be aware of how biases can affect individuals' behavior. While there are laws and regulations designed to protect against explicit and extreme bias (e.g., not hiring someone because of their race, gender, ability, or age), there are also instances when seemingly "small" things individuals say or do in the workplace can leave a long-lasting impression in employees' minds.

2a. Microaggressions and Microinvalidations

Such "small" things are known as **microaggressions** or **microinvalidations**: daily forms of taken-for-granted bias and discrimination that have a real effect on people's lives. The work of anti-racism and anti-discrimination is the ongoing struggle to recognize and respond to this situation.

Microaggressions are brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership. Microinvalidations are characterized by communications or environmental cues that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of certain groups.

Our differences from each other are important and worth addressing because they allow us to deepen our conversations and share perspectives that may vary according to our national, racial, gender, or class identity. Reducing or eliminating microaggressions, and responding appropriately when one occurs, is everyone's responsibility, and we can do it while still preserving academic freedom and insisting on everyone's right to speak openly and frankly.



TERMS TO KNOW

Microaggression

A brief, everyday exchange that sends denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership.

Microinvalidation

A communication or environmental cue that excludes, negates, or nullifies the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of certain groups.

3. Addressing Bias in the Workplace

If you are the target of, or observe, a microaggression, you are certainly not responsible for solving the problem unless you wish to take on that responsibility.

But there are actions you might take to help management and other employees take responsibility for what occurred:

- You might have a private conversation with a friend, team lead, or other manager about how to bring a problematic or hurtful dynamic up with the individual expressing the microaggression.
- You might describe to your superior what happened and ask to talk about it at a meeting or in a memo.
- If you are a bystander, you might talk to the team lead or manager. You might also take the person who committed the microaggression aside privately and share your perspective on what you saw and heard. Ask them how what they wanted to say could have been conveyed differently and more effectively. Encourage them to apologize if it is appropriate.

Even if microaggressions are often unintentional, we can still be intentional in reducing them. Here are some guidelines to keep in mind that might shape our intentions:

- Don't assume you know anything about a person, what they think or what they know, by what you see on the surface.
- You are not entitled to comment on a person's appearance, body, or presumed identity, unless your opinion is solicited.
- Wait for an invitation to ask a personal question, and remember that some people might classify a question as personal that you would be happy to answer yourself. If you want to be productively curious, disclose something about yourself and see if the person reciprocates. If not, let it go.
- Touching people presumes familiarity and should be preceded by an invitation to be touched.

Compliment someone's fashion sense, or ask them where they get their hair cut if you need a haircut, but keep your hands to yourself.

- At work, be specific in your observations about social differences, preferably with evidence drawn from the current workforce at your work location. Make sure you are expressing an informed opinion, not a misinformed opinion.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that there are **perception errors** that can impede communication, including **stereotypes**, **prejudice**, and **discrimination**. Whether intentional or unintentional, there is **common bias in the workplace** that takes the form of **microaggressions** and **microinvalidations**. It is vital to **address bias in the workplace** whether you are directly affected by it or not.

Best of luck in your learning!

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TERMS TO KNOW

Discrimination

Actions taken against a group of people.

Microaggression

A brief, everyday exchange that sends denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership.

Microinvalidation

A communication or environmental cue that excludes, negates, or nullifies the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of certain groups.

Prejudice

The beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and attitudes someone holds about a group.

Stereotype

An oversimplified generalization about a group of people.