

Maybe We're Not so Smart: Identifying Subconscious Bias and Micro-aggressions in Academia

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In the fall of 2009, we excitedly kicked off our program that would help to diversify our university professoriate and to change the campus climate to become more welcoming and inclusive toward women and minority faculty. Being a diverse pair of women ourselves, a Black Christian and a White Jewish Humanist, what could go wrong? A whole lot!



As we moved to energize our campus about examining their subconscious bias in hiring more faculty of color and women, we were caught off-guard by the subconscious bias that we found lurking in our own backyard.

Meetings and departments can be fertile ground for micro-aggressions and incidents of incivility. The opportunity to assemble spotlighted uncomfortable hierarchies: senior faculty vs. junior faculty, staff vs. faculty, Dr. Ming Shi Trammel male vs. female, minority vs. nonminority and STEM vs. non-STEM. http://diverseeducation.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/110812_Ming_shi_Trammel.jpg

In these gatherings, unsuspecting leadership that was not proactive in heading off instances of incivility allowed resentments to flourish, making meaningful collaboration and discussion concerning diversity difficult. It is our belief that relating these experiences and offering suggestions on what the chair or unit leader could have done differently may help others understand how micro-aggressions and bias operate and may help make positive change in campus climate.

Example 1: During a meeting, a junior faculty or staff member speaks up or makes a suggestion only to have a senior faculty member follow immediately (or interrupt) with a different point, without acknowledging the junior speaker's remarks and the discussion goes on as if the junior member had never said anything.

What the chair can do: The chair can pull back the discussion by acknowledging the statement raised by the junior member and giving it a full hearing. Only after that discussion is completed, turn the floor back to the senior faculty member. Interruptions may appear small but can have grave and damaging effects on the committee or group. In the worst case, members may disengage, withdraw and stop coming to meetings. It is important that the chair be aware of micro-aggressions and the circumstances under which they occur, e.g., between faculty and staff, senior faculty to junior faculty, between faculty in different areas of emphasis or between races or genders. Is there a junior faculty member or staff member that may be at a disadvantage if he/she asserts his/her voice? In this scenario, the chair can solicit opinions from everyone around the table or ask members to jot down thoughts in writing to ensure that all voices are given the chance to be heard.

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Example 2: A White faculty member walks into the room and speaks to everyone except the lone faculty of color.

What can the chair/unit leader do: At first glance this incident may seem minor; however, micro-aggressions acquire power through subtlety, appearing as inconsequential misdeeds by their perpetrator. For individuals at the bottom of a hierarchical organization, the experience of entering a room and no one speaking to them or someone of authority speaking to everyone but them, such nonverbals convey bias. Micro-aggressions communicate to their intended targets, "I don't have to verbalize that you are not important or that I don't like you because of your gender, race, sexuality, etc." They silently express, "I just don't have to acknowledge your existence."

It is important to speak to the offender privately and emphasize the importance of acknowledging everyone's presence at meetings. At the meeting, the leader can ensure that everyone knows all the members and personally greet everyone.

Example 3: A colleague expresses his/her feelings of incivility directed toward him/her by several faculty members during a recent meeting. Rather than acknowledge the uncivil behavior of faculty peers, another faculty member who was also in attendance denies seeing what happened and questions the interpretation, implying oversensitivity on the part of the colleague.

What the chair can do: Often it is easier to deny that slights occurred or to let slights go rather than confronting them, particularly when the slight is not blatant. Someone slighting another person can easily be dismissed as an individual being too sensitive, or it may be reduced with the three-word

insult, "Are you sure?" It's important that, whatever your thoughts, the slighted individual is heard. Put aside your opinions, values and judgments and give a full hearing to the other person's feelings.

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It is key for the chair to recognize the role s/he plays and the relationship s/he holds with the individuals around the table. Does the chair have relationships with members that may prevent him/her from being impartial? A good leader can leverage his/her relationships to break down barriers away from the conference table.

Conclusions

Leaders, by definition, lead groups. Therefore, leaders have an obligation to stop uncivil treatment, and if they don't, they betray all members of the group they are working for. Set ground rules for the committee or department. You might think that committee and department members are all adults and should know how to behave, but people aren't always aware of how their behaviors appear.

Ignoring small actions or comments is not effective. It does nothing to educate the members about the experiences of members who are not in the majority, it sends a strong signal that small acts based in unexamined bias are OK, and minority members may disengage from the group. Don't assume that minority members are experiencing the same climate as majority members. You probably won't hear about their experiences because micro-aggressions seem minor and no one likes to point them out.

The first step is to learn not to be afraid to talk about unexamined biases and stereotypes. It has been unfortunate, but these experiences have served to raise our collective awareness of biases and micro-aggressions. It has also shown that we still have a long way to go until the process is complete. However, it is only through talking, writing and working together that we are truly getting smarter.

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