

Aligning Intent and Impact: Countering Micro-Aggression

Micro-aggression definitions:

“A brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color.”

“Social exchanges in which a member of a dominant culture says or does something, often accidentally, and without intended malice, that belittles and alienates a member of a marginalized group.” (Dr. Derald Wing Sue)

Intent vs. Impact

Intent

What someone meant to convey. Often rooted in the speaker’s cultural influences, history, expectations, communication style, etc.

Impact

How something AFFECTED the other person. Often rooted in the listener’s cultural influences and history. Experienced by the other person as how what is happening is familiar to previous experiences.

Micro-Aggression Stress

1. Biological and physical effects
 - Accumulative small changes and stress can be additive and be equal to the effect of a major catastrophic trauma
2. Emotional effects
 - “Isms” affect emotional well-being, psychological adjustment, and mental health
3. Cognitive effects
 - Attempt to make meaning out of incidents
 - Disrupted cognitive processing (decreased focus and productivity)
 - Stereotype threat (identity/disengage from interests &/or under-perform)
4. Behavioral effects
 - Hypervigilance or skepticism (suspiciousness toward majority group)
 - Rage and anger
 - Fatigue and hopelessness
 - Adaptation to adversity (functional survival skills)

Adaptation Skills

Strategies to challenge and develop your intercultural learning:

- **Practice:** Confidence and Humility
- **Risk Taking**
- **Rebounding**
- **Reflective Learning** (learning from experience including and especially mistakes and failures)

Adaptive Change: Key Questions

- What is our goal?
- What is our role in relation to our goal?
- What do we do without losing our soul?

Moving from Cancel Culture to a Culture of Accountability*

1. **Recognition** – clearly stating what one did wrong. No “ifs”
2. **Responsibility** – claiming one’s role in creating the impact. No “buts”
3. **Remorse** – really meaning the “I’m sorry”
4. **Reparation** – recognizing that an apology not the end of accountability, but rather the beginning of something new regarding practicing different behavior. Committing to and demonstrating an obligation for the future.

**Adapted from Kenji Yoshino*

Rebounding: Validate, Appreciate, Investigate Strategy

Taking more risks increases the likelihood of making more mistakes. The only surefire way of improving competency in anything is to practice. Act with confidence and humility.

Validate

Our knee-jerk reaction is to focus on our intent, not our impact. “I didn’t mean to offend you” vs. “I see I may have made you uncomfortable” or “I’m sorry. It seems that I may have I offended you.” The former focuses on our intent, the latter on our impact. While you may not always understand another person or group’s experience, you can always validate their experience as real and true to them.

Appreciate

When someone calls something to your attention about your actions (words or behavior) it is important to recognize and appreciate that it takes courage to do so. The potential for conflict, misunderstanding, hurt feelings or broken relationships are all possible results of someone calling out a mistake. However, there is also value in drawing attention to the mistake. Correction is a form of respect and trust-building. Showing appreciation for their willingness to help you get better will often soften the impact of the initial mistake. Internally, challenge yourself to appreciate and value resistance as it can provide insight and potential for growth.

Investigate

Making mistakes are only beneficial if we are able to learn from them. If you have authentically validated the other's experience and impact, shown appreciation for their willingness to call your actions to your attention, the environment will be much more conducive to learning from them and getting feedback. Ask questions. Explore how you could have brought your good intentions more in line with your impact. What could you have done differently? What could you have said differently? Practice curiosity with humility and confidence. **Remember ... Authenticity trumps perfection!**

Curiosity: Asking Effective Questions

Being curious is a key intercultural skill. However, being effective and successful at getting the response you "really" want is a skill that takes practice and making some mistakes along the way. Curiosity is a practice to lean into with both confidence and humility.

Transparency + Reciprocity + Inquiry

Transparency

Pause and think: "Why do I want or need to know this information?" **Do** be as clear, upfront, and open as possible about your intention in asking a particular question. Provide context for why you are asking what you are asking. Being clear and transparent about your intention can help (but not eliminate) the possibility that your intent may equal your impact. If relevant, it may help to own your lack of experience, knowledge and discomfort.

Example: I am really curious about how living in a different community than where someone grew up might impact them.

Reflect: Be ready to share similar information about yourself. **Do not** put the burden on the other person to be the only one to share information or be vulnerable about themselves. Remember, if you expect others to risk sharing about themselves you too should also be willing to take the risk. **Do** briefly share something relevant about yourself.

Example: I grew up in New York and now live in Minnesota. I find that there are so many things, little and big, that are different here in the way people interact.

Inquiry

Reflect: What do I really want to know? **Do** ask the question you *really* want to know. Always precede your question with, "Do you mind me asking ...". This may seem like a long process or like jumping through hoops. The more you practice the better, faster and more effective you will become.

Example: Do you mind me asking, what is like for you to have grown up on a reservation and now live in a predominately white city? **Remember ... Sharing information = vulnerability!**

Commit to Reflective Learning

Practicing Adaptation requires the confidence to affirm what you know and the humility to know that, no matter how much knowledge and practice we have demonstrating intercultural competency, we will make mistakes. A key Adaptation skill is developing the courage to take risks to create change and a practice to actively learn from all our experiences ... the successes, the mistakes, and the failures.

Context setting:

What happened from your experience?

How might the others who were part of this incident describe their experience?

What developmental perspective might be reflected in how these experiences were experienced?

Reflective Questions:

1. Explore and appreciate – What went well? What can I celebrate?
2. What was challenging? What did not go successfully?
3. What can I learn from what went well and the challenges I had?
4. Given these lessons, what should I do?

Consider:

- What is my goal?
- What is my role in relation to my goal?
- What do I do without losing my soul?
- What should I (Be behaviorally specific)
 - ◇ Keep doing
 - ◇ Stop doing
 - ◇ Start doing