

Spinning Straw Into Gold: Responding to Microaggressions

Levitt Foundation, Fall 2024



Introductions

- Please put your name and pronouns (he, she, they, something else, or none) in your Zoom name
- In the chat, please share your organization, role, and answer:
What has been your favorite thing about fall so far?

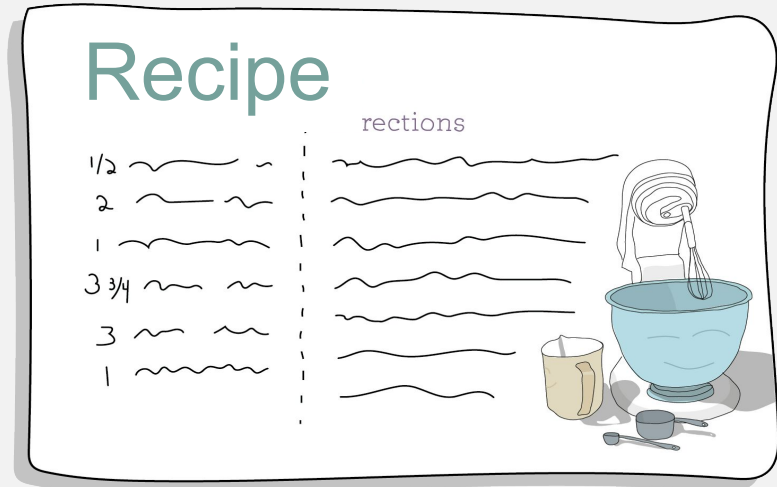


Ingredients we bring:

- Information about microaggressions
- Experience and wisdom from marginalized communities

Ingredients you bring:

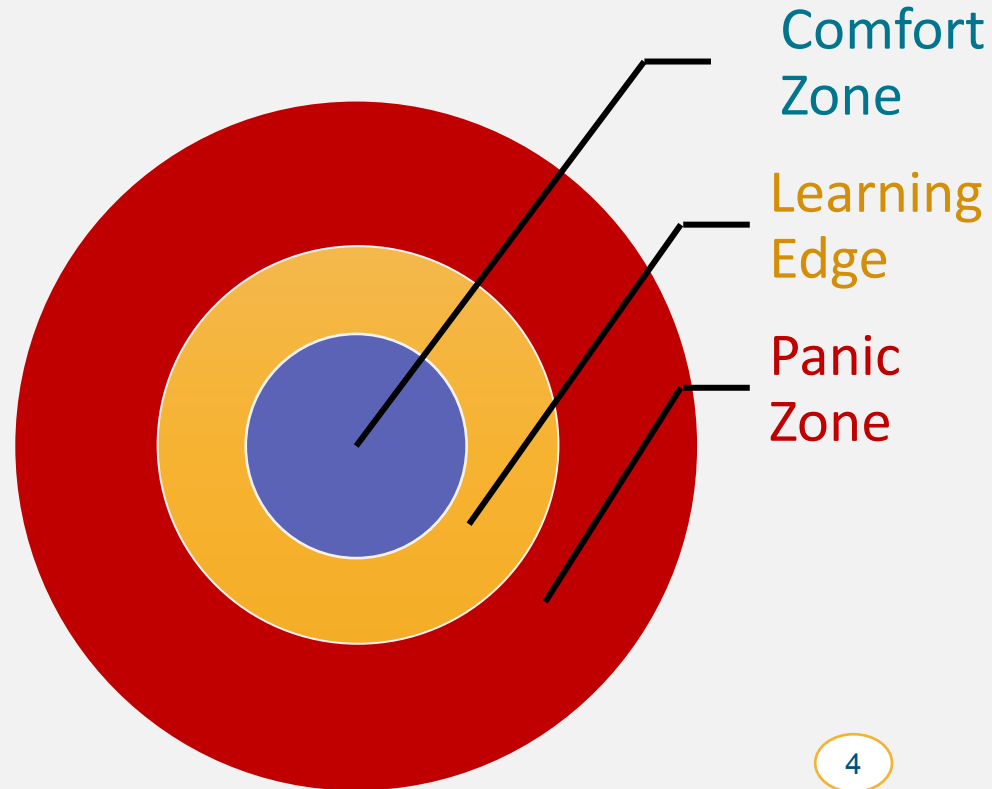
- Your personal and professional experiences
- Experiences with your identities in the world
- Honest questions
- Openness to learning even when it's uncomfortable
- Respect for each other's learning processes



1. Introductions, agenda, learning frameworks
2. Review definitions
3. Considerations for responding
4. Practice
5. Building cultures for repair
6. Q&A

Learning Frameworks

- ❑ We are **all** learners.
- ❑ We learn with our **whole selves** - body, emotions, spirit, and intellect.
- ❑ We learn through **making mistakes** in ways that are safe for us and others.
- ❑ We learn through **productive discomfort**, at the edge of our comfort zones



Pause and reflect (for later)



Think of a scenario from your own work that happened that you want to understand better and figure out how you could have responded.

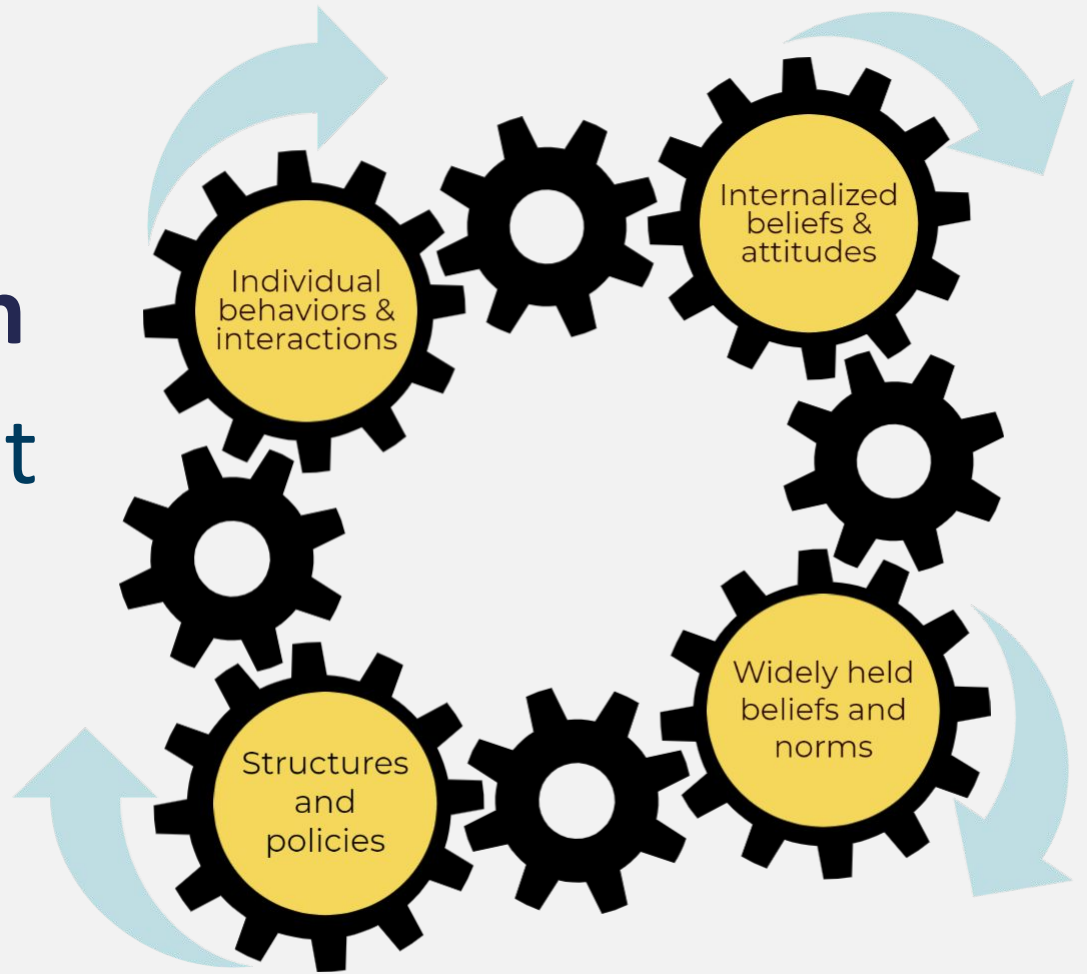
Microaggressions

Everyday, subtle, and/or relatively minor instances of bias that can seem like “no big deal,” and are often **unintentional**, but can have a big impact.



- Contain a “**hidden message**” that is often connected to a stereotype and system of oppression
- Are **repetitive** – the impact builds up over time & varies day-to-day
- Create **emotional work** for the target

“-isms” - racism,
sexism and so on
- are systems that
operate through
a variety of
mechanisms



What makes this a microaggression?

What's the "hidden message"?

What stereotype or pattern does it align with?

What impact might it have?

Where are you from?
(Chicago) No, like,
where are you *really*
from?



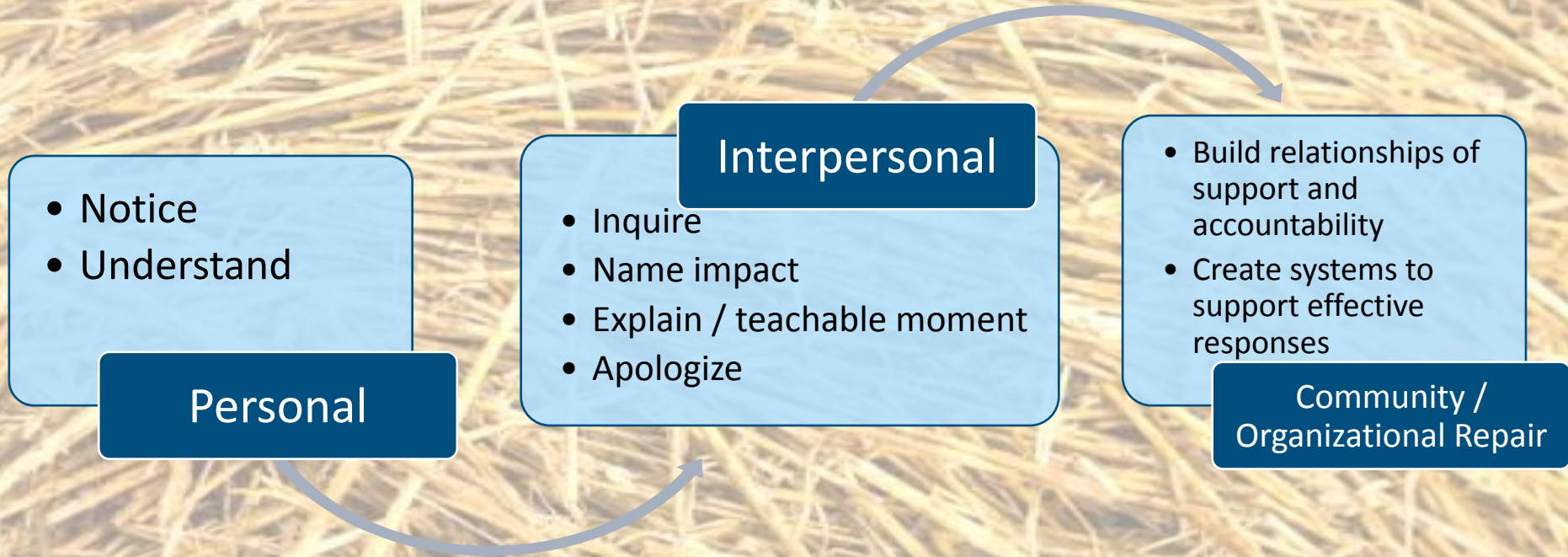
Quick check-in



Before we move into responding and practice, how confident are you with:

- the concept of microaggressions?
- identifying and naming microaggressions?

Spinning Straw into Gold



Considerations for Responding

What are your goals?

What are the risks to you and others?

What are the power dynamics and relationships in play?

What resources are available to you?

When you RECEIVED the microaggression ...

What are your goals?

- stop the person from continuing the behavior
- educate the aggressor
- protect your emotional boundaries / mental health / collegial work environment
- preserve a relationship

What are the risks for you?

- physical safety
- job safety
- loss of relationship / social capital / access

What resources are available to you?

- organizational policies or systems to address microaggressions
- supervisor or another person
- language from this training
- HR
- your own clarity, values, mindfulness
- ability to exit the situation
- time (to prepare; gather your ideas, etc.)

What are the power dynamics and relationships in play?

- relative positions in organizational hierarchy
- culture of retaliation vs culture of supportive problem-solving
- likelihood of being taken seriously/ being believed

When you WITNESS the microaggression ...

What are your goals?

- stop the person from continuing the behavior
- educate the aggressor
- **protect colleagues' safety / emotional boundaries / mental health / well-being / collegial work environment**
- support colleague
- **social pressure on aggressor to avoid behavior again / reassert inclusive work culture**

What resources are available to you?

- organizational policies or systems to address microaggressions
- supervisor or another person
- language from this training
- HR
- your own clarity, values, mindfulness
- ability to exit the situation
- time (to prepare; gather your ideas, etc.)

What are the risks for you?

- physical safety (less risk)
- job safety / being fired or written up
- loss of relationship(s) / social capital / access

What are the risks for others?

- **all of the risks of being target**
- **retaliation by aggressor**
- **have to engage with situation / manage aftermath**

What are the power dynamics and relationships in play? (consider self, aggressor, & target)

- relative positions in organizational hierarchy
- additional social identities (positionality)
- culture of retaliation vs culture of supportive problem-solving / restorative practice
- likelihood of being taken seriously / believed
- existing relationship dynamics
- larger contexts (event/comm./country/world)

CORRECT/CHALLENGE THE STEREOTYPE

- “In my experience _____.”
- “I think that’s a stereotype. I’ve learned that _____.”
- “Another way to look at it is _____.”

SAY STOP

- “Just stop. It’s not funny.”
- “Come on. Cut it out.”
- “Do not use language like that around me.”

MIRROR

- “Where are YOU really from?”
- “Can I touch YOUR hair?”

PRETEND YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND

- “I don’t get it...”
- “Why is that funny?”

PROMOTE EMPATHY

- “I know you don’t like the stereotypes about _____ (their group), how do you think he feels when he hears those things about this group?”
- “How would you feel if someone said that about/did that to your sister or girlfriend?”

USE HUMOR

- “She plays like a girl? - You mean she plays like Serena Williams?”

SHARE YOUR OWN PROCESS

- “I noticed that you _____ (comment/behavior). I used to do/say that too, but then I learned...”

SEPARATE INTENT FROM IMPACT

- “You probably didn’t realize this, but when you (comment/behavior), it was hurtful/offensive because _____. Instead, you could _____ (different language/behavior.”

TELL THEM THEY’RE TOO SMART OR TOO GOOD TO SAY THINGS LIKE THAT

- “Come on. You’re too smart to say something so ignorant/offensive.”

ASK FOR CLARIFICATION OR MORE INFORMATION

- “Could you say more about what you mean by that?”
- “I’m wondering how you have come to think that?”

REMIND THEM OF THE RULES, POLICIES, OR ORGANIZATIONAL VALUES

- “That behavior is against our code of conduct and could really get you in trouble.”

EXPRESS YOUR FEELINGS

- “When you _____ (comment/behavior), I felt _____ (feeling) and I would like you to _____.”

When you're not sure what to say ...

"I don't think that landed how you meant it to."

"When you say do you mean it to sound like ...?"

"I feel a little uncomfortable about that."

"I know you didn't mean it that way, but I've learned that people find that word really offensive."

"I noticed ... and I worry it might have landed like ..."

"Come on, you know better."

"That is a stereotype."

When you RECEIVED the microaggression

What are your options for responding?

- **In the moment - many of the same options discussed for witnesses**
 - “That’s not funny”
 - “I’m not comfortable with that”
 - “When you say ___ I feel ___”
 - “Instead of that, I want you to _____”
 - Turn it around, e.g. “Where are *you* really from?”
- **Later - many of the same options, plus**
 - “I didn’t say something at the time because ____, but ____”
 - “After thinking about it ...” or “After discussing it with ...”
- **With support**
 - From a trusted peer
 - From a mentor
 - From a leader on the team



Large Group Practice

At the post-event celebrations with volunteers and artists, an artist “jokingly” imitates a volunteer’s accent. You aren’t sure if the volunteer heard.

- What do you need to consider (goals, risks, resources, power dynamics) to respond effectively?
- What are some of your options for responding?
 - What sentence starters could you use and why?
Practice saying them outloud!
 - Pros/cons of each option



Small Group Discussion

We will spend a few minutes in the small group discussions with a facilitator. For your scenario, name the microaggression's "hidden message" and then discuss how you would respond



- What do you need to consider (goals, risks, resources, power dynamics) to respond effectively?
- What are some of your options for responding?
 - What sentence starters could you use and why?
Practice saying them outloud!
 - Pros/cons of each option

Then work on a real scenario you want to work through

Scenario A

In a volunteer orientation led by 3 men and 1 woman, the woman notices that the men seem attentive to each other. But when she presents her section to the volunteers, the 3 men seem to stop paying attention and start multitasking. One of them jumps in and interjects to answer a volunteer's question, before she has a chance to.

- What is the “hidden message” in this scenario?
- What do you need to consider (goals, risks, resources, power dynamics) to respond effectively?
- What are some of your options for responding?
 - What sentence starters could you use and why?
Practice saying them outloud!
 - Pros/cons of each option



Scenario B

At the end of a concert, a few concertgoers are filling out the audience survey near the main exit of the park. At one point, one of them has their eyebrows raised, scrunching their face. They make a loud outburst about the “gender identity” question, exclaiming “Why are they asking me that?!” while their friends snicker and laugh. A group from the organizing committee is nearby, including one who recently disclosed that ze is trans.

- What is the “hidden message” in this scenario?
- What do you need to consider (goals, risks, resources, power dynamics) to respond effectively?
- What are some of your options for responding?
 - What sentence starters could you use and why?
Practice saying them outloud!
 - Pros/cons of each option



Scenario C

Two people approach the information table. One of the people, who happens to be in a wheelchair, asks the person behind the table where the restrooms are. The person behind the table stands up and pointing in the direction of the restrooms, says, “Tell your grandparent that there is a huge line already and the accessible bathroom is broken anyway.”

- What is the “hidden message” in this scenario?
- What do you need to consider (goals, risks, resources, power dynamics) to respond effectively?
- What are some of your options for responding?
 - What sentence starters could you use and why?
Practice saying them outloud!
 - Pros/cons of each option



Levitt Foundation Team Scenario

During a team meeting, Mia (25 years old) shares her ideas using a casual, conversational tone. She suggests adding more visuals and infographics to the upcoming presentation to make it more engaging. The team lead, Robert (50 years old), responds: "That's a very modern way to present, Mia. Back in my day, we focused on substance over style. Maybe stick to a more traditional approach—it's what serious professionals expect." After the meeting, Robert emails Mia, writing: "Your approach is fine for someone just starting out, but you'll learn with age to communicate more professionally."

- What is the “hidden message” in this scenario?
- What do you need to consider (goals, risks, resources, power dynamics) to respond effectively?
- What are some of your options for responding?
 - What sentence starters could you use and why? *Practice saying them outloud!*
 - Pros/cons of each option

When you find out you *did* a microaggression ...

C

Center - breathe

L

Listen

A

Acknowledge / Apologize

I

Invite more information

M

Moving Forward - Repair

When you DID the microaggression

Apologizing in the moment

- Acknowledge what you did and its impact
- No excuses
- *Invite* (but don't require) further discussion
- Commit to doing better



Apologizing later: the same ingredients, plus

- “I realized that when I _____, that was a problem because _____”
- “If you don't want to talk about it that's fine, and if you do want to share anything about how that impacted you or how I can make it up to you, I am open to hearing that”

Long-term, repair trust in a way that's appropriate to the relationship

Building Cultures Where Repair is Possible



When a fracture has happened in your environment:

- What kind of resources and support might you need to (re)build trust?
- What resources might help you cultivate relationships of allyship?

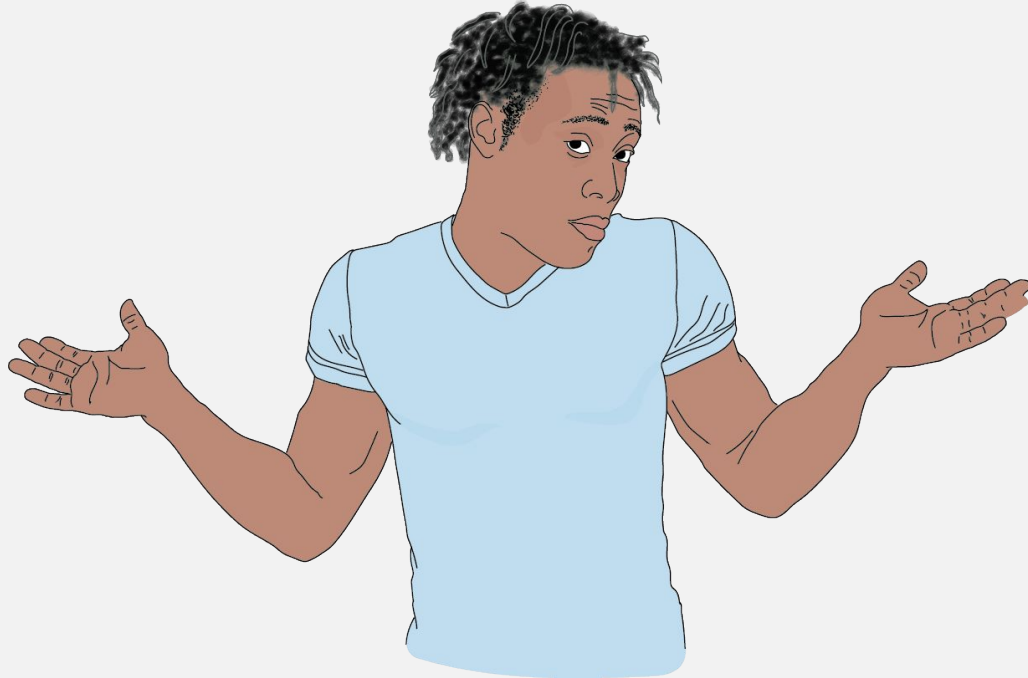
These connections are central to how people can show up for each other when microaggressions happen, and when appropriate, to how you can support each other's learning.

Closing Reflection...

What's one piece of this you are going to practice/ focus on going forward?

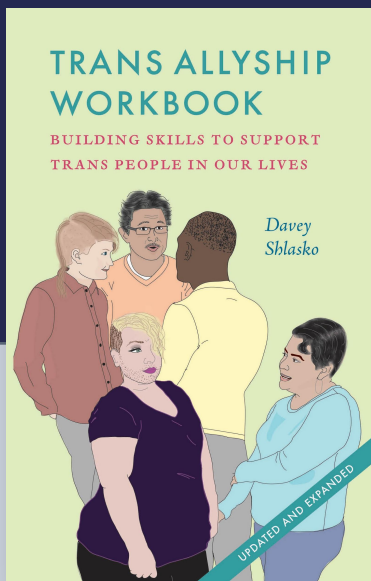


Questions?



Thank you!

Check out our book:



Get in touch any time:



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