

UNDER-THE-RADAR DISCRIMINATION & THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

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The February 2023 EN:Insights Forum followed up on last year's groundbreaking research on diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) efforts by diving into the workplace experiences of employees with marginalized identities, specifically examining the everyday experiences of Black employees that typically go unaddressed or even unrecognized at higher organizational levels.



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“There’s much previous research that shows Black employees have distinct experiences at work, including unique barriers to advancement, and DE&I efforts that are general in nature may overlook how to overcome those barriers,” said Katie Merlini, Ph.D., a senior researcher for HR thought leadership at SHRM.

“In this study, we targeted the under-the-radar experiences of Black employees to reveal what we can do to foster DE&I progress and the impact of these experiences on important workplace outcomes.”



The research focused on race-based microaggressions—interactions or behaviors that communicate hostility, derogation, or other negative slights toward Black co-workers. These interactions happen “under the radar” because they can be very subtle, with the perpetrators unaware of how much their actions or comments can hurt Black co-workers. One danger of ongoing microaggressions is that it’s easy for others to disregard them or explain them away, rather than confronting their implications.

“In our findings, we see that Black employees continue to be the targets of these microaggressions, with two of every three Black employees reporting that they’ve experienced at least one of the microaggressions in our study in their current workplace,” Merlini said. “This is almost twice as much as those in other racial/ethnic groups in our study. Although this finding isn’t necessarily surprising, it’s important to empirically show that microaggressions are still a problem—and a larger problem for Black employees.”

About 2 of every 3 Black employees reported that they had experienced at least one race-based microaggression at their current employer. The most common promote negative stereotypes about Black employees, with less common slights rendering Black employees invisible to other workers.

PERCENTAGE OF BLACK EMPLOYEES WHO HAVE FACED COMMON MICROAGGRESSIONS

46%

Told that all Black people are alike

45%

Existence of race-based obstacles denied

40%

Told they would succeed if they worked harder

38% Believed to have received unfair benefits

36% Behavior assumed to be aggressive

33% Success viewed as being due to diversity policies, not accomplishments

32% Expected to be submissive

31% Made to feel invisible

29% Mistaken for other co-workers of the same race

25% Work contributions dismissed or devalued

23% Ignored in work environments

20% Choice of dress or hairstyle seen as unprofessional

19% Described as “not a true American”

Microaggressions create on-the-job mental health issues

Microaggressions come in many forms, and several of them can significantly hurt Black employees' mental health, including contributing to job-related anxiety or depression.

The factors most likely to affect Black employees' mental health include being:

- Made to feel invisible.
- Expected to be submissive.
- Expected by others to demonstrate aggressive behavior.
- Ignored in work environments.

Black employees who experienced these microaggressions at least monthly were around two to six times more likely to have worse mental health and want to quit their jobs compared to those who did not experience the microaggressions.



“The U.S. Surgeon General’s 2022 report on mental health highlighted how workplaces contribute to mental health and well-being, and not always in positive ways. And we’re seeing evidence of that here in our current study,” Merlini said. “We’re seeing that some of the less common microaggressions have an important impact. So though they’re slightly less common, we still need to mitigate them when it comes to creating positive under-the-radar experiences.”

Sponsorship is one solution, but Black employees can get short-changed: Sponsorship in the workplace refers to when someone, typically with influence, advocates for another employee's career advancement and success at work. Unfortunately, Black employees feel they receive less sponsorship compared with white and Asian/Pacific Islander (API) employees.

PERCENTAGE OF EMPLOYEES WHO AGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS

SOMEONE AT WORK
SHARES MY
ACCOMPLISHMENTS
WITH OTHERS

White **60%**

Black **45%**

Latinx **45%**

API **50%**

SOMEONE AT WORK
RECOMMENDS ME FOR
IMPORTANT TASKS OR
POSITIONS

White **58%**

Black **42%**

Latinx **48%**

API **45%**

SOMEONE AT WORK
STANDS UP FOR ME
WHEN I'M QUESTIONED
BY OTHERS

White **53%**

Black **41%**

Latinx **38%**

API **45%**

“Sponsorship is related to greater employee engagement, which is when employees feel immersed or inspired by their work. And it related to psychological safety, which is the belief that it’s safe to take these interpersonal risks at work, such as speaking up without fear of reprisal, contributing ideas and making mistakes,” Merlini said.

“The top driver of engagement was being stood up for when questioned by others, which may be particularly critical as a form of social support in the workplace, as a signal someone has your back,” she added. “And when it came to psychological safety, the top driver was being recommended for important tasks and positions. This form of sponsorship may be particularly powerful in helping employees feel that their ideas and experiences are valued and therefore safe to share at work.”



What are the key takeaways? It's clear from these results that these under-the-radar experiences have important implications at both the individual and company levels. Bringing these experiences to the surface can allow organizations to mitigate microaggressions, because people know what they are and how they cause harm.

UNDER-THE-RADAR EXPERIENCES IMPACT:

- Individuals (mental health, attitudes).
- Companies (DE&I progress).

BY SURFACING THESE EXPERIENCES, WE CAN:

- Mitigate microaggressions.
- Reinforce equitable sponsorship.
- Support DE&I progress.

To address microaggressions, “We can work to create more equitable sponsorship,” Merlini said. “Some ways to do this are to think through what our criteria are for sponsoring someone, ensure the criteria are based on performance or talent and not some other non-job-related factor, and apply those criteria across all people in our work groups. By addressing these experiences, we can help remove some of the barriers experienced by Black employees—and likely by others—and ultimately help drive better DE&I progress.”

MARISSA ANDRADA

GET MICROAGGRESSIONS

OUT IN THE OPEN



The new SHRM research on the unseen but very real challenges faced by Black employees comes as no surprise to Marissa Andrada, who has been a leader in HR functions with Starbucks and Kate Spade and most recently served for more than five years as the chief diversity, inclusion and people officer for Chipotle Mexican Grill before joining the board of Krispy Kreme.

“The good news about this research, specifically for Black populations, is that it puts some context around what under-the-radar behaviors are, which is an opportunity for people to understand what that actually looks like and to describe those behaviors,” Andrada said. “I talk to a lot of leaders and work with a lot of companies, and there’s almost an allergy around these DE&I terminologies because, for C-suite leaders specifically, the question is: ‘How does that translate to growth?’ So I’m not surprised; however, I was surprised about the takeaways on the impact of microaggressions on the Black population, specifically.”



Andrada, a first-generation American whose parents immigrated from the Philippines before she was born, is no stranger to microaggressions.

“A microaggression that I’ve experienced earlier in my career, but quite frankly, later on in my career, too, is the first interaction I’ve had with someone, and their reaction is, ‘Wow, you speak really good English.’

That’s happened to me,” she said.



Q & A WITH MARISSA ANDRADA

Q: **Can you give us some examples of inclusion policies?**

A:

“Companies make a lot of progress on committing to an inclusive environment, where everyone can thrive regardless of their background, when it starts with the notion of inclusion inside their purpose and their values. I’ve been around the block for 25 years in my career, and especially for all of you who are senior leaders, when you put an inclusion policy out there, I think most people respond like, ‘I’m not even going to read it,’ right?”

“But if you talk about an example of what an inclusion policy is, what does your purpose statement include around how you cultivate environments so people can thrive in terms of values, what you expect from each other, and how we work together, then the inclusive behaviors and expectations on how we work together are included. I would give you that as an example because I have found that when you start putting a policy out there, forget it.”



Q: Are formal mentorship and sponsorship programs better than organic relationships?



A:

“You can do it both ways with the direct reports to the CEO. A good opportunity is for the CEO to ask every one of these senior leaders to take on two things. One is sponsorship of somebody, and that’s organic, but then with your help as the chief HR person or the senior person in talent, making sure you’re serving up that diverse slate of people who need that sponsorship. It feels like you’re volunteering people to do it, but I’ve seen that work when CEOs actually set the expectation.

“Especially if it’s a large organization, what’s helpful is that it’s more systematic, yet it’s organic because people still need to choose to participate. There are a lot of human capital technologies out there, so if you’re supporting an organization that has a distributed hourly workforce, you give people an opportunity to participate by having them put in their information, and then it’s kind of like matchmaking. Have leaders match with someone who is looking to get mentored by someone who has a skill set or an experience that they’re looking to gain. Systems like that provide more access and participation to everybody.

“You can’t just say, ‘Hey, that’s my favorite person because I see them wearing my favorite color,’ or ‘I might have run into them playing golf.’ When, as the lead talent person, you’re serving up this diverse list of high-potential employees to the leaders and asking them, ‘Hey, who would you like to sponsor?’ it starts from there.”

Q:

How can we counter arguments about being “too woke” or “too politically correct”?

A:

“Companies need to understand that diversity, equity and inclusion are really a matter of business. If a company’s trying to grow, see if there’s a way you, as an HR leader, can talk about it in a way that’s driving business outcomes. In some cases, people are trying to flow that money down to the bottom line. In other cases, they want to see a level of growth.

“As DE&I professionals, we need to think that it’s about human behavior, but it’s also about high performance and what drives and engages people. If we’ve learned anything coming out of three-plus years into this pandemic, it’s that business is now more personal than ever. It’s getting to the overall holistic mental, emotional and financial well-being of people in your organization. That covers everyone in the organization. So, it’s not about being too politically correct or too woke, but it is about being human.”

Q: What about charges that DE&I efforts create reverse discrimination?

A: “I think data speaks about this. When you’re doing your talent reviews, and you’re going through an overview of the numbers, start with looking at males and females. Look at representation and what representation goals you have. I always start with that because I have found that as companies start their diversity journey in terms of representation, they’re like, ‘Well, you’re treating that person differently.’ And I think it’s not so much about treating someone differently. Instead, here’s another terminology I love to use: It’s about being intentionally inclusive.”



Q: What can be done when microaggressions are coming from the top of an organization?

A: “If there are microaggressions coming from the top, senior leaders may not even be aware that what they say and how they say it is experienced by others as microaggressions. When I first used the word microaggressions at my last company, I kid you not, I had a leader look at me and ask, ‘What do you mean by that?’ And I gave him the example of two things people have always said to me. One is, ‘Wow, you speak really good English’ in our first meeting, or ‘Where are you from?’ And when I answer Los Angeles, they say, ‘No, originally,’ and I want to say, ‘From my mom and dad.’ They’re assuming that I came from another country.

“I’m breaking it down for C-level people that this is what a microaggression feels like and their response is, ‘No, people have never said that to you.’ I tell them, ‘Let me help you understand how that makes me feel.’ I don’t know that they’re intentionally being jerks, but I think that’s what throws senior leaders off. It’s about helping leaders understand what the word microaggression really means.”



Q:

Can you give an example of a highly successful DE&I activity that you rolled out?

A:

“I’ll take it back to appreciation. When you set up a system where you’re encouraging leaders to shape their own behavior, to have one-on-one conversations with individuals about what they are dreaming about or what it is personally that you are focusing on that can help you become more effective in the job or in life, it goes a really long way.

“I saw this in practice when I was at Starbucks, and the president of the U.S. and Americas [division] set the expectation with every one of his leaders to know their people two levels down. So your direct reports, not only understand their role, but who they are and what it is they’re dreaming about. And then extending that to the next level down. That’s a lot of work, but if you set that, leaders will follow. It’s fascinating to watch.”



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