



## EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR COMMENTARY

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### **Do You Know What A ‘Microaggression’ Is?**

By Robert Rader, Executive Director, CABE

I attended three workshops provided by SDE on *Examining Unconscious Bias in the Hiring and Selection Process*, with priority participation given to Connecticut’s Alliance Districts. While the hiring process, especially as it relates to state and district goals to increase racial and ethnic diversity in our workforce is a critical issue, I received a real education (pun unintended) in understanding the obstacles faced by people of color and others.

As I wrote in the *June Journal*, the idea of “white privilege” is central to understanding some of the challenges that nonwhite people have to deal with on a regular basis. In that editorial, I included part of a quiz that gives one a sense of what walking in the shoes of a person of color must feel like.

One need not agree with the concept of white privilege as it is used. However, understanding it and having empathy for those who are affected by this perception (some would say “fact”) helps open people to dealing with the history of and the current role race plays in our culture. It also sets a vision of where we might go in the future.

Looking at the world through an equity lens enables us to see things we might otherwise miss. In the third of the four workshop series, we discussed an additional way to look at how we speak to each other, giving offense sometimes without meaning to do so. Experts on cultural competence call these “microaggressions” and they can be used without the speaker even realizing he has used one.

The impact on the recipient, not the intent of the speaker.

According to one expert, microaggressions are: “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights, invalidations, and insults, to an individual or group because of their marginalized status in society”. For people of color, microaggressions are “constant, continual and cumulative.”

These microaggressions are not just aimed at people of color, nor are they all towards one particular group of people of color-- Chinese and African individuals don't receive the same microaggressions but they can still be recipients. Women can also face microaggressions, people in different religions can be the target of microaggressions and so can those with disabilities.

Here are some examples of microaggressions. Again, there need be no deliberate intent to insult (but, there could be), but the microaggressions assume something that will put down the recipient.

- “Where are you from?” “You speak good English.” “Where were you born?”  
All three of these provide the message that the recipient is not American.
- “You are a credit to your race.”  
This sends the message to a person of color that he or she is part of a group (race) that is not up to a high standard.
- “When I look at you, I don’t see color.” “America is a melting pot.”  
These messages deny a person of color’s racial or ethnic experiences.
- A white person clutching their purse or checking their wallet as a person of color walks by.  
The message here is that the person of color may be a criminal.
- “I’m not racist—I have Black friends”  
This assumes that the speaker is immune to racism because he has friends of color.
- “As a woman, I know what you go through as a racial minority.”  
The message is that a woman’s experiences and challenges are equal to that of a person of color.
- “Everyone can succeed in this society, if they work hard enough.”  
The message is that people of color are lazy or incompetent and that they just need to work harder.
- Being ignored at a store counter as attention is given to a white customer.  
The message is that the white person is a more valued customer than a person of color.<sup>i</sup>

While I can readily understand that these statements or actions can be insulting, I would also argue that the context in which some of these words or actions are stated and the relationship between the people involved may affect how they are sent and received. Be that as it may, however, greater sensitivity to how the recipient will take certain remarks is always helpful, especially in fraught situations.

As part of examining an area such as hiring processes through an equity lens, words really matter as they so often indicate leanings and biases that we may not have realized were ours. Discussions of stories about race and racism also help sensitize a potential interviewer to his leanings. For example, there are many reasons that an interviewer may give a poor rating to a

person due to the impact of our culture's stories. Until recently, for instance, few people of color were on television news unless the story had to do with a crime. Those watching might get to believe that there is a much greater chance of becoming a victim of crime when seeing a person of color.

These perceptions of other races “tell us a lot about what society considers meaningful and important.” Especially at a time when the State and individual districts have recognized the great importance of hiring and retaining teachers and administrators of color, it is important to look beyond the stock stories about race with which many of us grew up—and counter them if they are biased and/or untrue.

Considerations for Board Members, Superintendents and District Selection Committees. So, how do we get beyond these influences as we try to diversify workforces? Here are some suggestions that emerged from the workshop:

- Use hiring panels and ensure that they are diverse.
- Give candidates the chance to show their abilities.
- Post openings earlier and have simultaneous interviews with inside and outside candidates. This was used very successfully in Boston's Human Capital Initiative.
- Do more screening of candidates.
- Standardize the interview process.
- Make sure you engage with Historically Black Colleges and Universities for candidates.
- In some communities, it is helpful to ensure that there will be places for accepted candidates to live.

The hiring process has never been easy. But, with a true understanding of the challenges and open mind to new ideas, I believe that Connecticut can continue to make progress and reach the State Board's goals of having “increased numbers of teachers and leaders of color” and “great teachers and leaders [who] collectively reflect the rich cultural diversity in Connecticut.”

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<sup>i</sup> Source: Sue, D.W., Capodilupo, C.M., Torino, G.C., Bucceri, J.M., Holder, A.M., Nadal, K.L. & Esquilin, M. (2007, May-June). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychology*, 62(4), 271-286