

A FRIENDLY, MULTICULTURAL WORKPLACE

A TOOLKIT FOR TRAINERS, MANAGERS, HR PROFESSIONALS AND
TRADE UNION LEADERS



Module II

EFFECTIVE ALLIANCE

From microaggression to microaffirmation

ON MICROAGGRESSIONS



Small but painful hits

One manifestation of discrimination, but also a driving force behind it, are so-called **microaggressions**. Microaggressions are all small, isolated and often considered harmless **behaviours which, despite their seemingly innocent form, express dislike, hostility, contempt or simply an indulgent or negative attitude** towards a person or group of people.

Microaggressions are mostly **unconscious** and are not necessarily intended to harm or offend others. However, because they **carry implicit messages** about our beliefs, attitudes or prejudices, they make people **feel uncomfortable**.

The power of microaggressions lies in their **repetitive** nature. While one joke or snide remark may go unnoticed, daily exposure to such behaviour creates feelings of alienation and insecurity.

Examples of microaggressions

- **"Innocent" jokes and comments based on stereotypes and prejudices** (e.g. "about the female driver").
- **Calling some people** (women, migrants) **by their first name**, while for others we use their job title or academic title (*Mr Director, Mr Professor*).
- **Interrupting others during meetings** and/or not allowing them to speak (especially when we do this to one person or a group of people).
- **Constantly "forgetting"** someone when passing on important information or when inviting them to a meeting.
- **Automatically assigning administrative or housekeeping functions to women and/or migrants** (as in the example given earlier about the board meeting).

Why are microaggressions so dangerous?

The offensive power of microaggressions is the consequence that:

- they are often perceived as funny - most people see nothing wrong with them (mainly because they do not apply to them), and their authors are often "rewarded" (with laughter, attentiveness, etc.);
- they **are "contagious"** and their use can quickly become the norm in an organisation or team;
- Singular jokes often **seem not worth responding to**, but the lack of an adequate response causes them to escalate;
- individuals who try to defend themselves against microaggressions are often **accused of being oversensitive, lacking a sense of humour** or being overly "politically correct".

WHAT IS ALLIANCE?



We all have influence!

We all have influence over whether our organisations and communities become migrant-friendly. Even if you are not involved in the creation of company policy and do not hold a managerial position, it is largely **up to you to determine how colleagues and co-workers from a different cultural background will feel in your team**. After all, it is the day-to-day interactions with the people on our team that are our primary experience of organisational culture.

If we have **open, friendly and supportive** people around us then we will become acclimatised more easily, and crisis or stressful situations will be easier to get through. On the other hand, even the greatest organisational policies and procedures will not be able to compensate for a lack of kindness on this first, team interaction front.

Czym jest, a czym nie jest mądre sojusznictwo?

Alliances are taking actions aimed at **supporting a social group at risk of inequality, a group to which we ourselves do not belong**. Allies tend to have a better position than people from the groups they support. They are privileged in some way, and **they use this privilege to effectively support others**.

Alliance is the **return of power taken away by unequal treatment**. At the same time, it is important to remember that over-support is not helpful, and over-protection can easily turn into patronising treatment. Anyone who has had to deal with an overprotective aunt or grandparent knows this. Allies are about **supporting, not bailing out**; amplifying someone's voice, not speaking for them; giving others space, not taking it away.

It doesn't take much to make someone feel better

In the following slides, we present five simple tips on how, with a little effort, you can modify your daily behaviour and become a more effective ally. These tips are:

- 1. LISTEN AND HEAR**
2. PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT YOU SAY
- 3. USE MICROAFFIRMATIONS**
4. GIVE SPACE
- 5. REACT**

5 PRINCIPLES OF WISE ALLIANCE



Listen and hear

Listening is perhaps the most important skill not only for allies but for anyone who cares about good relationships, effective collaboration or effective leadership.

Careful, empathetic listening, **without interruption, over-interpretation, prying questions, uninvited advice or instruction**, is the first step to truly understanding the situation of those experiencing unequal treatment. It is also the only way to **know the needs** of those whose welfare we care about. By knowing the needs, we will in turn be able to plan appropriate support actions.

Listening is also the first step in **influencing others in an effective and non-manipulative way**. To persuade someone to change their behaviour, for example to stop making hurtful comments, we need to start by talking calmly and listening to the intentions behind the behaviour.

Be careful what you say

As we know from the chapter on microaggressions, **words can hurt**. "Cleansing" our language can begin by implementing a few simple rules:

- **laugh so that everyone can laugh.** There are so many jokes in the world that even if we refrain from racist or sexist ones there will still be plenty to laugh about;
- **abstain from comments that reproduce stereotypes and prejudices.** Don't use generalisations and generalisations like *"Because you people in Ukraine have it so..."*. Don't tell a person of another nationality that it's great that they got this far and became a manager. Don't tell a colleague that he's doing great with kids for a guy. Nor to a colleague that she drives super for a woman. Comments like that, even if their intentions are quite positive, appeal to stereotypes, reproduce them and, in fact, are not nice at all.

Be careful what you say

- **Take terms offensive to national, ethnic or cultural groups out of your dictionary.** Note: it is not up to you to decide what is or is not offensive. If a person from the discriminated group and/or their allies tell you that a term is inappropriate - it just is.
- **Use sensitive, equality language i.e. words and terms that emphasise equality and respect for different groups.** An example of such language treatment is the use of femininatives or 'feminine endings'. The 24.02.2022 was also an important lesson in sensitive language. We learned then, firstly, that Ukraine as an independent state deserves to be referred to as "in Ukraine" and not „at Ukraine". We also felt the big difference between the term "armed conflict in Ukraine" and "armed attack by Russia on Ukraine".

Be careful what you say

- **Treat everyone with equal respect.** If you address each other formally at a meeting, using "Mr/Ms", names and/or job titles, address everyone in the same way, regardless of their level of confidentiality, position, gender or age. In particular, take care not to address people from groups at risk of discrimination in an overly familiar, diminutive or impersonal way.
- **Do not interrupt, ignore or belittle any person** who attends a meeting. In particular, take care not to belittle people, from groups at risk of discrimination.

Use microaffirmations

We have already mentioned microaggressions, i.e. small, individual behaviours that, despite their apparent innocence, perpetuate stereotypes and hurt. Fortunately, there are also micro-affirmations, or **small, simple gestures that can brighten someone's day and make them feel better.**

Microaffirmations include all words, gestures and behaviours that let the other person know that: **I see, I hear, I understand, I respect, I appreciate.**

Such reinforcement can be a simple look, a smile, a warm greeting or a goodbye.

Use microaffirmations

Other examples of microaffirmations that we can use on a daily basis at work include:

- letting someone know that we **appreciate and/or admire** the results of someone's work;
- **expressing gratitude**, e.g. for help, effort or a valuable comment in a meeting;
- **offering someone support** in a non-intrusive, peer-to-peer way;
- **listening to someone**, as Celeste Headlee recommends;
- inviting someone to **join you for lunch**;
- **showing interest** in another person, etc.

Give up space

A major problem for people who are discriminated against is that **their voice is often left out of the discussion**, even when they are directly affected by such discussion. A quick glance at television or radio debates is enough to notice that there are still programmes in which discrimination against women is discussed mainly by men, and the situation of refugees is discussed only by Poles who have never had to consider fleeing their country.

Similar situations occur in our workplaces and private spaces. That is why inviting people who have been discriminated against to discussions, debates and decision-making bodies is a very important supporting measure. Giving space back **is another example of a situation where listening is better than talking, and giving space to others is better than acting.**

Give up space

It is also worth remembering that people from disadvantaged groups should be given a voice, not just when we talk about discrimination, but **whenever we raise an issue that is important to the workforce**. Only in this way will we be able to consider the needs of all groups in all parts of the organisation, and only in this way will we be able to tackle inequalities effectively.

We can also give back space in **daily meetings and interactions**. As mentioned above, people from disadvantaged groups often experience being interrupted or not being allowed to speak. If you see this happening in your space, **you can 'give away' your space to such a person** by saying, for example, *"Natasha, I'm curious to hear your opinion on this topic"* or *"Wait, Sergei had an interesting idea, I'd like to hear him finish"*.

React

Microaggressions and other discriminatory acts thrive in our workplaces because they **are still widely tolerated**. To break this vicious cycle, it is worth responding to manifestations of discrimination in your environment. As employees, we have a particularly strong influence on eradicating the microaggressions described above. Firstly, because we are often direct witnesses to them. Secondly, **the role of third parties is crucial and cannot be overestimated**.

The person who has been humiliated by a 'joke' or who has been the victim of a sexist/racist comment is usually unbalanced. At any given moment, they may not have the strength or position to defend themselves. This is where the role of the bystander comes in. **It is our job to point out the inappropriateness of the behaviour described and to prevent it from escalating** (as we all know, 'ugly' jokes can be very contagious).

React

Of course, responding to discrimination is not always easy. Difficulty or resistance will be felt especially when the perpetrator of the microaggression is a superior or another person with a tenacious character or a tendency to aggression. Nevertheless, even in such a situation, we are not helpless. A safer form of reaction in such a case than a direct one may be **to divert attention away from the victim**, for example by returning to the main topic of conversation.

On the other hand, if we are not able to react immediately, we can always **approach the victim after the meeting**, support them, show that we are on their side, offer to talk to them, etc.

And let's not forget that every major employer should **have anti-discrimination procedures in place** covering, among other things, the process of reporting and dealing with wrongdoing. Let's try to use them.

SUMMARY



Worth remembering!

- ✓ **We all have a part to play** in making our organisations welcoming to migrants.
- ✓ Allieship is **giving back power that has been taken away by unequal treatment.**
- ✓ Allieship means **supporting but not bailing out, caring but not overprotecting.**
- ✓ Effective allyship requires **self-work, humility and genuine, empathetic commitment.**
- ✓ Everyday allyship is about **small, simple gestures that make a big difference.**
- ✓ The key to supporting others wisely is **good communication: the ability to listen and to pay attention to words.**
- ✓ Allieship is also about **using microaffirmations, giving space and responding to irregularities.**

Material developed as part of the project *Enhancing the potentials for decent work actions in social dialogue: 2023-2024* implemented by Międzyzakładowy Samorządny Niezależny Związek Zawodowy Pracowników CMC Poland Sp. z o. o. i Spółek and Ogólnopolski Konwent Agencji Pracy. Supported by Norwan through the Norway Grants 2014-2021, under the programme “Social Dialogue – Decent Work”.

