

MICROAGGRESSIONS ACTION PLAN



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VERSION 1.1

CONTENTS

Executive Summary	1
Introduction	2
Event Summary	
Speakers	3
Event Format	3
Key Takeaways and Actionable Conclusion	
Round 1: Microaggressions Experienced or Witnessed	4
Round 2: Immediate Actions by Individuals to Address Microaggressions	5
Round 3: Industry Actions to Address Microaggressions	6
WCE’s Commitment	8
References	9

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Microaggressions may come across as one-off instances that are often brushed aside but can cumulate to consequential impacts over time. Women and other marginalized members of the engineering and construction industry are often faced with barriers that prohibit career advancement, including navigating microaggressions which otherwise contribute to an unwelcoming environment and workplace.

Women in Consulting Engineering (WCE) Vancouver aims to support and empower women in consulting engineering, so when a member came forward with a letter addressing their own negative experiences in the workplace, it was evident that a call to action was essential.

WCE hosted a workshop addressing microaggressions in the modern workplace, which consisted of an initial tone setting hosted by a leader in the industry, followed by three round table discussion topics with collaborative interaction between each round. The topics navigated from microaggressions that attendees have experienced or witnessed in the workplace, immediate actions by individuals to address microaggressions, and concluded with bold industry actions to address microaggressions.

Microaggressions that were experienced or witnessed varied under a wide range of categories and extended beyond gender, age, and appearance to include examples such as assuming parental leave will have a negative effect on a woman's career.

Each individual can take responsibility for their own actions, so the second round focused on immediate actions to address microaggressions directed to either yourself or to a colleague or friend. To start making a change, participants shared actionable items such as focusing on allyship, leading by example, continuing education and self-reflection, and standing your ground.

In an effort to address beyond individual actions, the final round concluded with sharing bold actions the industry can take to reduce the commonality of microaggressions in the workplace, which addressed actions for engineering associations, support groups, and company management.

WCE commits to continuing to provide resources and opportunities for women and other minorities within the industry to seek out a safe space to express their need for support and to find an organization that can advocate on their behalf.

This resulting Action Plan aims to provide guidance to members of the industry to commit to addressing the microaggressions prevalent and to create a future where all members of the industry have equal opportunities to grow and thrive.



INTRODUCTION

In March 2018, the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of Alberta (APEGA) began a three-year project to examine the barriers women face in the engineering and geoscience workplace and their findings were published in “Women in the Workplace: A Shift in Industry Work Culture”. Based on their analysis of the survey data, they displayed notable discrepancies between men’s and women’s responses to questions about facing gender-based discrimination in the workplace and the barriers they perceive women face in the workplace compared to men. More than half (52 percent) of all male survey respondents rated their workplace comfort level as ‘Extremely Comfortable’, compared to only 27 percent of female respondents. According to the survey data, one of the top three barriers women face in the workplace is misogynistic and sexist attitudes, along with a high degree of unconscious bias and microaggressions. A microaggression is defined as a statement, action, or incident regarded as an instance of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group such as a racial or ethnic minority (APEGA 6).

In 2023, Women in Consulting Engineering Vancouver (WCE) received a letter from one of its members that raised concerns about the microaggressions and, at times, macroaggressions they had faced in the workplace as a woman in the engineering and construction industry. WCE wanted to use this letter and the concerns encompassed within it as motivation for an event that could further raise awareness and develop actionable initiatives that could be implemented by members and companies within the industry. Thus, WCE decided to host a round-table style workshop event with the final goal of creating an Action Plan.

This Action Plan was created following the event to serve as a guide for all members and the industry to further assess the existing issues and develop initiatives to address microaggressions in the workplace.



EVENT SUMMARY

SPEAKERS

The event was moderated by Leona Smith, the Head of Section and Senior Project Manager at COWI North America and WCE's previous Membership Director. Marisol Valerio Navarrete, Principal Rock Mechanics Engineer at WSP Canada Inc. set the tone for the evening by opening the discussion by sharing her own experiences with microaggressions and intersectionality and continued to support the event by expressing her views on the discussed topics between each round. Her tone setting and vulnerability were invaluable in drawing the same vulnerability from participants and contributing to the success of the evening.

EVENT FORMAT

Participants were seated at tables of six to eight people for the duration of the evening, allowing for an intimate, comfortable setting for connections to be made. The event was structured in three rounds:

ROUND 1
Microaggressions
Experienced or
Witnessed

ROUND 2
Immediate Actions
by Individuals
to Address
Microaggressions

ROUND 3
Industry Actions
to Address
Microaggressions

Each round began with tone setting from Marisol, with each topic introduced through her personal experiences alongside some general discussion prompts. Participants were then given approximately 20 minutes to discuss and were asked to write three to five highlights of their tables' conversations on sticky notes. At the end of the round, these sticky notes were brought to Leona and Marisol, who categorized and shared the discussion highlights with the attendees. These highlights were also used to further develop this Action Plan.

KEY TAKEAWAYS AND ACTIONABLE CONCLUSIONS

Each round has been summarized to identify common themes and topics raised by members during the discussion. Statements noted during the event were discussed by the moderators and some of the dialogue has been captured in the summary of each round below to provide further context on the topic.

ROUND 1: MICROAGGRESSIONS EXPERIENCED OR WITNESSED

Round 1 began with a topic aimed to encourage participants to share ideas with their table and highlight some of the major microaggressions experienced or witnessed in the industry. Each table provided a wide array of examples, which were generally divided into the following categories:

- ▶ **Gender**
- ▶ **Ethnicity**
- ▶ **Intersectionality**
- ▶ **Age**
- ▶ **Parents**
- ▶ **Harassment**
- ▶ **Appearance**
- ▶ **Neurodivergence**



The categories quickly accumulated experiences from participants, whether they were the one to experience the situation or witnessed a colleague in a position, and included examples such as:

- ▶ Assuming the individual is not technically knowledgeable due to their gender.
- ▶ Stereotyping an individual's knowledge/experience based on their ethnicity.
- ▶ Assuming an individual has been hired solely for the organization to meet their "diversity ratios" which can lead to tokenism. Tokenism is a superficial means of addressing important issues but disregards the individual's knowledge and experience (Meriam-Webster 2024).
- ▶ Questioning your ability to do your work due to your age (either older or younger).
- ▶ Assuming parental leave is only for women and that it will have a negative effect on their career.
- ▶ Enduring unwanted contact and not respecting physical boundaries.
- ▶ Commenting on clothing choices or assumption on ability to do your job based on your appearance.
- ▶ Negative assumptions about people with neurodiversity.

KEY TAKEAWAYS AND ACTIONABLE CONCLUSIONS

ROUND 2: IMMEDIATE ACTIONS BY INDIVIDUALS TO ADDRESS MICROAGGRESSIONS

Following the discussion of microaggressions that participants had experienced in the workplace, the workshop progressed to discuss what immediate actions individuals could take to mitigate microaggressions. The provided recommendations were largely grouped into the categories below.

ROUND 2
 Immediate Actions
 by Individuals
 to Address
 Microaggressions



Allyship

Provide allyship by being attentive and supportive. Politely call out microaggressions right when they occur, even if they are not directed at you. Light but timely reminders are key in driving change towards squashing microaggressions. Check in with the victim of the microaggression and ask if they would like support in addressing the microaggression.



Lead by example

Use inclusive terms, such as 'parental' leave, instead of 'maternal' leave, and gender-inclusive terms to address a group of people, as opposed to non-inclusive terms, such as 'guys'. If you are in a leadership position, set idealistic examples that your subordinates can seek inspiration from.



Education and self-reflection

Reflect on your own biases and consciously work towards shifting your mindset. Seek direct feedback in a one-on-one environment from a trusted ally if you require further guidance. Share feedback with your manager for improvement, such as training opportunities and organizational cultural shifts. Strive to proactively create a psychologically safe environment during meetings and gatherings. Do not be afraid of having uncomfortable conversations with your coworkers to educate them on the implications of their language or actions.



Stand your ground

Rehearse addressing recurring microaggressions, and ask the microaggressor to repeat themselves, repetition can give them a second opportunity to reflect on the microaggression. Moreover, remember to protect yourself, it is acceptable to remove yourself from the situation and choose not to address the microaggression or address the situation at a later time through other channels (such as reporting to your manager or HR).

KEY TAKEAWAYS AND ACTIONABLE CONCLUSIONS

ROUND 3: INDUSTRY ACTIONS TO ADDRESS MICROAGGRESSIONS

Finally, conversations led to bold actions that can be taken to address the negative experiences that are occurring in the industry. The need for reflection on industry culture is a matter of paramount importance. Despite concerted efforts, instances of marginalization and bias are still prevalent, particularly affecting women, people with disabilities, people of colour, LGBTQ+ individuals, Indigenous peoples, and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

ROUND 3

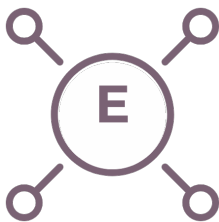
Industry Actions
to Address
Microaggressions

Our industry thrives on diversity, necessitating the acknowledgment of microaggressions and the implementation of proactive measures. Open dialogue, transparency, and accountability are essential, which needs to begin with governing bodies and industry driving and enforcing change.

The following summarizes key initiatives and actions that were discussed as they pertain to engineering associations, support groups and initiatives, and the management within each company.

Engineering Associations

Incorporating the management of microaggressions into broader diversity and inclusion goals is imperative. Provincial engineering associations should establish the following:



- ▶ Clear regulations against microaggressions, categorizing them as a form of harassment.
- ▶ Mandatory education and training sessions tailored to address microaggressions provide personal and professional development at all organizational levels.
- ▶ Guidelines outlining consequences for non-compliance.
- ▶ Accountability through disciplinary actions and a commitment to a zero-tolerance policy.

KEY TAKEAWAYS AND ACTIONABLE CONCLUSIONS

ROUND 3: INDUSTRY ACTIONS TO ADDRESS MICROAGGRESSIONS

Support Groups and Initiatives:

Emotional and psychological safety are vital in fostering a healthy work environment. Understanding the impact on individuals and the workplace is crucial in initiating discussions on addressing microaggressions. Here are some actions which the industry could take:

- ▶ Forming resources such as Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) or Affinity Groups to create safe spaces for underrepresented groups which foster a sense of community and improve work cultures.
- ▶ Encouraging workshops on microaggressions as part of professional development, such as the one hosted by WCE.
- ▶ Providing mentorship and peer support initiatives targeted at underrepresented groups can further enhance inclusivity.
- ▶ Establish a space for follow-up conversations, surveys, and forums for feedback and idea sharing, which build a framework for continuous improvement, ensuring progress in these discussions and that goals and objectives are met.



Management within Companies:

Promoting open communication and normalizing corrective action is essential to this process. Associations and companies can adopt the following practices to help ensure implementation:



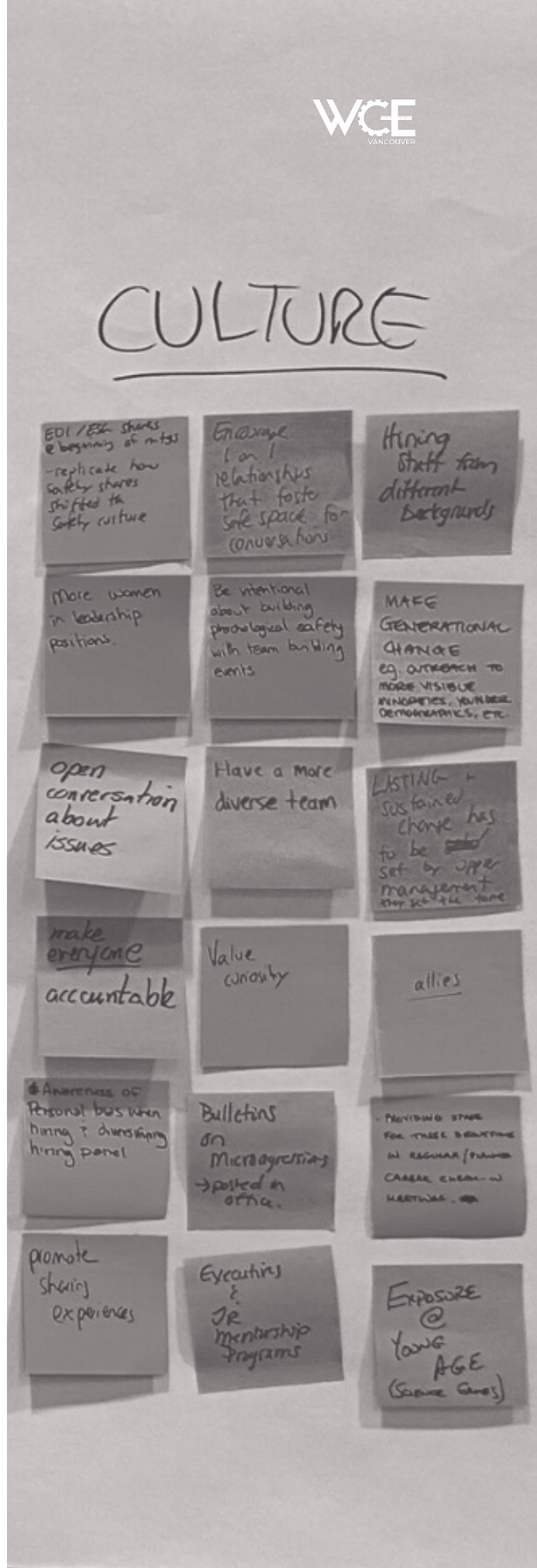
- ▶ Create a safe environment for open dialogue, ensuring confidentiality and non-retaliation through multiple reporting and discussion channels.
- ▶ Encourage upper management to act as allies by promoting cross-cultural understanding and solidarity. These leaders should encourage self-advocacy and assertiveness, as well as recognize and reward proactive behavior.
- ▶ Training should be provided to upper management on how they can adopt and facilitate equity and inclusivity practices.
- ▶ To promote this further, companies can look into industry leaders and highlight successful initiatives in other organizations that showcase best practices and success stories, emphasizing the value of collaboration and knowledge-sharing. Leveraging all these external expertise and partnerships is a great way to learn from diverse approaches to inclusion and diversity.

WCE'S COMMITMENT

Addressing microaggressions in the workplace requires a multifaceted approach encompassing education, training, open communication, allyship, and learning from industry leaders. By fostering a safe and inclusive environment and promoting open dialogue, organizations can strive towards a supportive and inclusive workplace where all employees feel valued and respected.

As an organization founded to support and empower women in consulting engineering, WCE aims to ensure that our events are tailored to suit the needs of industry professionals. Following the call from one of our members noting the challenges in the industry, it was evident that WCE was able to provide a platform for like-minded individuals to discuss the changes we can make to address these challenges, as well as how we can better support the industry in addressing the current conditions. By offering workshops, courses, and an inclusive and safe community, WCE begins to take these actions to further shape the change necessary to promote a workplace that is welcoming to all.

WCE remains an ambassador for this action plan and will continue to support the needs of our community. We encourage companies to also address the harmful actions that have consistently been pushed aside and create a community that enables a diverse range of individuals to engage in the engineering profession, ultimately shaping the future of the industry for the better.



REFERENCES

Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of Alberta. Women in the Workplace: A Shift in Industry Work Culture. November 2021. PDF file

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