**Ways to Interrupt and Engage Microaggressive Situations:**

# A Beginning Set of Steps & Guiding Principles, Especially for White Change Agents

**Complied by Kathy Obear, Center for Transformation and Change** [**www.drkathyobear.com**](http://www.drkathyobear.com)

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Directions: As you review these possible steps and principles:

* Which, if any, could you imagine doing effectively? Have done at times?
* If not in these specific ways, how could you shift some of the phrasing to align with what you feel could be useful?
* What additional responses could be effective as well?

**A. Be prepared and ready to speak up**

1. Practice panning/observing group dynamics with a Race Lens:

* What people say, don’t say
* Nonverbal reactions
* How people interact or not

1. Recognize the probable negative impact and racial implications of comments, actions, silence, etc., on People of Color and anti-racism goals.

**B. Prepare to speak up in the moment**

1. **Breathe** & **choose courage**
2. **Relate to the person**, if you can: **Remember when**, if ever, you have thought, said or done similar things OR could possibly in the future.
3. **Get clear on your intentions** for speaking up; What you hope to accomplish, such as:
   * Interrupt racist dynamic
   * Support those negatively impacted
   * Help the person whose behavior you believe is problematic to understand and take responsibility for their impact, even if unintended
   * Educate why the comment, behavior or policy has a racist impact
   * Build connections and relationships with others for further dialogue, learning, and organizational change
   * Others?
4. **Take responsibility** for doing something

**C. Potential ways to engage as you interrupt unproductive dynamics and racist microaggressions** (Not necessarily in order, though this provides a useful flow to consider)

1. **Stop, pause the conversation** in order to address the impact of the racist dynamics.
   * Ask: Can we pause, take an “equity pause”?
   * I’d like to slow the conversation down and talk about what just happened…
   * Let’s take a breath…
   * I needed a moment... I'd like to circle back to that statement...
   * I think your comment may have had an unintended impact.
   * You may not have realized the possible impact of what you just said.
   * I don’t know if you noticed, but when you said \_\_\_\_, I felt a shift in the room and saw some people react. I’d like to slow down and talk about this.
   * We agreed to pause if anyone thought there might be an unintended impact of our comments and actions. I’d like us to take a moment to explore and examine this last part of our conversation.
   * I feel our discussion is not aligned with our anti-racism goals.
   * We are not engaging according to our Engaging Guidelines and I’d like us to talk about this.
   * I trust you didn’t intend this, but your comment landed on me in ways I’d like to discuss more. And maybe on others as well.
   * My guess is you may not have realized how:
     + Your tone may be impacting others….
     + Your comment landed on some of us…
     + Your nonverbal reactions are impacting some of us…
   * I’m going to interrupt this conversation. I believe there is some negative impact we need to explore.
   * I need to stop a moment and talk about what just happened.
   * I’m curious what people are noticing about our group dynamics…
   * I’m feeling unsettled with our conversation just now.
   * I need to stop a moment and talk about what just happened. I’m feeling triggered and this is why....
2. **Clarify** what you thought you heard

* I thought I heard you say…. Is that accurate?
  + Come again? Or Can you repeat that? (if repeating it doesn’t cause further harm)
  + I want to make sure I understand your point… you think that… your concern is... you believe that…
  + Are you saying that \_\_\_?

1. **Share what you observed/panned**
   * When you said \_\_\_\_, I felt… (uncomfortable, confused, anxious, concerned, angry …)
   * As \_\_\_ was speaking, I noticed you \_\_\_\_\_ (had a side conversation, interrupted them, shook your head, smiled and looked at another white colleague, deeply sighed, looked at your cell phone for a minute or more…)
2. **Invite the person to explore the impact of their comments and/or actions**
   * As you pause and reflect, how do you think others may have been impacted by what you said/did?
   * What message might people take away, unintended or not?
   * How do you think others could view you when you make similar comments?
3. **Acknowledge the probable impact** of the comments/actions; **offer additional ones**, if applicable
   * I agree that your unintended impact probably was…
   * In addition to what you said about the probable impact, I also think that….
   * An unintended outcome of what you said/did could be …
   * When I heard you say \_\_\_, I thought/felt....
   * I believe many people would take your comment to mean....
4. **Ask for more information** (if doing so won’t cause more negative impact)
   * Can you help me understand what you meant?
   * What did you mean when you said \_\_\_?
   * What was your intent in sharing that?
   * What were you hoping to communicate?
   * What were you wanting to accomplish with your comment? Action?
   * How do you see what you said/did helping us meet our racial equity goals?
5. **Share back what you heard them say, to check for understanding**
   * So from your perspective…
   * Your intentions were….
   * The message you wanted to communicate was….
   * So, you’re saying that...
   * So, you feel that...
   * So, you think that…
6. **You may need to hold space for further clarification** if they did not fully agree with your paraphrasing (if doing so won’t cause more negative impact)
   * How close am I to understanding?
   * Anything else you’d like to clarify?
7. **Hold space for others to share the impact on them**
   * My guess is others were impacted as well. Are you open to hearing from other group members?
   * Anyone else want to share the impact they experienced?
8. Possibly in the moment, definitely afterwards, **explore what may have been fueling their comment or action**:
   * What was going on for you when you said/did\_\_\_\_?
   * What were you feeling when you said/did\_\_\_\_\_?
   * What was underneath your comment/question? Some concerns or fears?
   * What has been your experience that led you to that conclusion? Concern?
   * Can you share a personal story or example to help us understand more? Maybe why you feel so strongly?
   * What assumptions or beliefs are underneath your conclusion? Concern?
   * I wonder if you hit some hot buttons, triggers before you said/did…
   * What readings or research are you using to support your comments/actions?
9. Invite the person to identify **what may have been more effective**
   * I understand you were feeling/thinking \_\_\_\_. As you look back, what might have been more effective ways to respond and engage?
   * What do you wish you had done differently, if anything?
10. **Acknowledge any effective responses** they offer, and **add/invite any additional ones**, if applicable
    * I think your idea would have been one way to respond. Another thought for next time might be to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_...
    * I like your idea, and recently when I was in a similar situation I \_\_\_\_\_\_\_...
    * That’s one possibility, and someone once suggested to me to …
    * Other ideas anyone thinks would have felt more useful?
11. **Explore the impact** of pausing to examine the impact of these comments and actions
    * I appreciate the group and you pausing to explore the impact of your comments and actions.
    * What are you taking away from this conversation?
    * How was this process for folks?
    * Anything we can do differently in the future in similar situations?
12. **Offer to be of support** in the future
    * I am available to continue debriefing with anyone as we reflect on this dynamic and the impact.
    * I’m still learning effective ways to interrupt and engage in racist microaggressive situations and other problematic dynamics and would welcome the chance to keep learning as well.

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