

Addressing Racism In The Workplace



It is astonishing that in the same week that we've read about astronauts going into space in a reusable rocket, we have also experienced the horrors of humanity reading about the killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor. It is a horrific paradox and many of us are asking – what can I do? And we in Lawson Lundell are also asking ourselves what can we do? How can we help our clients have the difficult but necessary conversations with their employees or customers and examine their policies to truly combat racism?

I got in the elevator the other day carrying a tray with two coffees – one for myself and the other for my assistant. The other person in the elevator remarked “You’re going to make your boss very happy this morning.” Was that just an innocent comment by a person trying to start a friendly conversation in an elevator? Perhaps you may see it as such, unless you are a person of colour, like me, who experiences this sort of innocuous, yet stinging, comment on a daily basis. I know that my male, white partner would not have been seen the same way. And it is this perception, this bias – be it purposeful or unconscious – that is harder to look at and examine in terms of the impact it has on our employees. That was not an uplifting way to start the morning. A million tiny daggers to the heart have the same effect as one sharp jab – but the difference is that we can learn to stop them, fight them and with time, even remedy them.

As employers and leaders of organizations, we have a responsibility to take action to combat racism. Most of us in our daily lives cannot even imagine the overt hostile and violent racial hatred we have heard about amongst some of our neighbours in the south. Nevertheless, we still need to address race based microaggressions and biases that continue in our own workplaces on what is perhaps a lower level, yet on a daily basis. What do we do when our co-worker asks a person of colour “where are you from?” or “where did you learn to speak English?” or “do you celebrate Christmas?” While such questions may seem innocent and an attempt to “get to know” someone, they may actually be subtle and insensitive microaggressions and an insidious form of racism. Microaggressions are those little comments and nonverbal cues that are directed towards people of colour and minorities that lack sensitivity. As all of us become more aware of our rights and the subtle roles race and gender based bias can play in the larger community and the workplace, it creates more opportunity for employees to speak up and complain when they feel wronged, left behind, or excluded. It also gives employers an opportunity to actively combat racism in the workplace. And keep in mind, these subtle forms of racism put employers at just as great a chance of a human rights complaint or grievance as the more overt acts.

Not only do employers and managers need to be informed about human rights legislation and be provided with training regarding unconscious bias and its impact on employees, it is also time they re-examined workplace policies regarding hiring, promotions and discrimination. It is also time to recognize that people of colour are often held back from leadership roles – and to examine and address the reasons why.

This is not a matter that will be solved overnight but we can begin by doing things such as:

- Establishing mentorship programs for all of your employees
- Tracking the success of employees who start at the same level to determine if race plays a role in your organization
- Establishing a diversity officer or ombudsperson to deal with systemic racism and discrimination
- Educating employees about microaggressions and unconscious bias as a form of discrimination
- Providing diversity and inclusion training for managers
- Learning to look at the hiring, promotion, or even scheduling decisions you make through a race and gender based lens

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The content of this article is intended to provide a general guide to the subject matter. Specialist advice should be sought about your specific circumstances.

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