



# “I cannot believe you just said that”

## Stereotypes, Microaggressions and Biases

*“But where are you actually from?”* - a question often asked when the person speaking doesn't sound the way we expected them to. So, we ask them where they're actually from to put ourselves at ease, to put them in a box, and to know how to readily engage with them. *“I knew you were Jewish!”* - that affirmation we get when our colleague knocks off early on a Friday afternoon so that they are home in time for Shabbat, and confirms some of the suspicions we had about them. *“Your name is so hard to pronounce!”* - code for *“what language is this?”*

Stereotypes, microaggressions, and biases not only put humans into socially conditioned and acceptable boxes but, at a deeper level, threaten psychological safety, leaving recipients with an **“I cannot believe you just said that”** feeling. These seemingly innocuous comments, which often go unheeded, occur frequently within organisations, and reinforce dehumanising attitudes and behaviours that slowly strip people of their dignity at work. The Science of Inclusion suggests that psychological safety is the foundation for building a truly inclusive environment (Bourke & Dillion, 2017). People are likely to feel more respected, safe, empowered, and that they belong when the workplace reflects the goodness of our humanity.

Below are a few more examples of statements that leave people thinking **“I cannot believe you just said that”**, together with an alternative reaction or food-for-thought for each:

<b>“I cannot believe you just said that”</b>	<b>Alternative statement</b>
That girl from HR.	Our colleague in HR, or use their name
To a colleague of colour: “You are so articulate”.	Compliment the substance of what they are saying, rather than how they sound.
Some roles are just meant for women.	In 2021, where we are seeking a balance between genders, mentioning this might be misplaced.
You’re transgender? Wow, you don’t look like it at all.	If we have not been invited to comment on someone’s orientation, such statements might not be necessary.
She cannot take that role in another country, she is female. What about her family?	How about finding out the appetite of the particular woman to relocate to another country?
The way you have overcome your disability is so inspiring.	Ask to be educated about the disability, and through that you can determine whether they have had to overcome something or have always seen themselves as whole. Therefore, the statement might not be welcome.
You look so young; how can you be so clever?	Acknowledge the contribution and thank them for it.
You’re gay? You should meet my friend Ann. She’s gay too.	Like the transgender example, coming out does not necessarily mean they are seeking to be partnered with others who are of the same sexual orientation.
(Interrupting) “Well actually, I think ...what she is trying to say is...	Advocate for an opportunity for their point to be heard without making it seem they failed to articulate themselves.
To people wearing traditional or religious clothing: “Why do you wear that?”	Ask to be educated about the particular national dress or costume to add to your cultural intelligence.

The above statements on the left all exhibit an underlying assumption that the trait being commented on is desirable and, because of a person’s circumstances, the situation could be worse. Therefore, the person should be grateful for the comment. For example, the sentiment that you are transgender, and you actually look like it, or that you are African, and you actually sound like it. It is also assumed that there is something about the person that is making it difficult to stereotype them, because it is more convenient to stereotype and put people into ‘socially conditioned/ acceptable’ boxes, than to truly engage and immerse ourselves in meaningful, human, curiosity-based conversations that challenge those stereotypes.

### **The impact of unconscious biases**

According to the University of California San Francisco’s Office of Diversity and Outreach, a bias is *‘a prejudice in favour of or against one thing, person, or group compared with*

*another, usually in a way that's considered to be unfair*'. When it is unconscious, it means that it lies in one's blind spot. We are not even aware that we are exhibiting or projecting that bias.

The interesting aspect about the example statements listed above is that they are not said with any malice intended. It is the impact they have when they are heard that results in the creation of 'otherness', exclusion, a feeling of being judged or a perceived lack of preservation of the dignity of another.

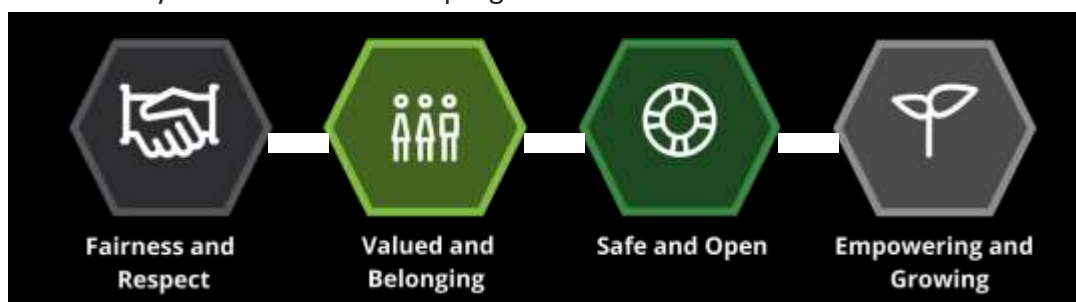
So, why does this matter?

Neuroscience tells us that people can exercise their best thinking and engage the executive function of their brain - the prefrontal cortex - when they feel psychologically safe. When such statements are said, they threaten the psychological safety that is required for people to think collectively, to focus on problem solving collaboratively, and to have robust conversations that result in superior quality solutions because, instead, they are now engaged in the **"I cannot believe you just said that"** conversation in their head.

Dignity can be defined as *'the glue that holds all of our relationships together'* and *'the mutual recognition of the desire to be seen, heard, listened to, and treated fairly; to be recognised, understood, and to feel safe in the world'* (Hicks, 2011). These seemingly innocuous comments that frequently occur in organisational settings, and which are often viewed as acceptable, are in fact reinforcing dehumanising attitudes and behaviours that slowly strip people of their dignity. This results in people not feeling that the organisation recognises that they are distinctly human at the core and that their human needs for respect, acceptance, love, belonging and psychological safety matters more than anything else.

### The Science of Inclusion

Deloitte's Science of Inclusion framework is based on the premise that for people to feel psychologically safe and included, they must first feel that they have been treated with fairness and respect, and that their dignity has been preserved. This refers to the foundational element of equality of treatment and opportunities. People need to feel a sense of belonging and that they are valued; that they are not experiencing the feeling of 'otherness', but rather their uniqueness is known and appreciated. They need to feel that the environment is safe and open for them to voice their opinion, to challenge each other without fear of retaliation and, finally, that they are empowered - that there is a sense of growth driven by our human need for progression.



Source: Juliet Bourke and Bernadette Dillon: *Waiter is that inclusion in my soup? A new recipe to improve performance*

Applying the Science of Inclusion framework to the ***“I cannot believe you just said that”*** statements helps determine what has been violated by the statement. This framework elevates the awareness of what we need to be cognisant of to create working environments that are psychologically safe and inclusive. Ensuring we are in the habit of consciously reflecting on our biases and strengthening inclusive behaviour will naturally begin to cultivate inclusive environments because, as Stephen Frost says, *“Unless you consciously include, you will unconsciously exclude.”*

## **Conclusion**

We all exhibit a degree of unconscious bias based on the social stereotyping and conditioning that we have been exposed to since childhood, which has informed our own worldview. In this article we shared a few examples of how this can show up in our interactions. As much as we think of the ***“I cannot believe you just said that”*** conversations we have had in our heads about other people, we should also consider how many people have said that to our own statements - we need to turn the mirror inwards too. The Science of Inclusion tells us that we all want to feel respected and to experience fairness and inclusion/ equality - preservation of human dignity. It gives us a framework for thinking about how we can improve inclusion in our workplaces and societies as a whole. What will be your role in contributing to a more inclusive society and workplace? ***What is going to be your everyday act of inclusion?***

## Key Contacts



### **Fortuna Gamanya**

**Associate Director: Africa Diversity and Inclusion Leader**

**Deloitte Consulting**

[fgamanya@deloitte.co.za](mailto:fgamanya@deloitte.co.za)

+27(0)21 427 5824

Fortuna is the Africa Diversity and Inclusion leader at Deloitte Consulting. She is an organisational development strategist with deep experience in leadership development, strategy formulation, executive alignment and culture transformation. She is the Western Cape Human Capital Leader. Fortuna is passionate about creating organisations that are fit for human beings.



### **Devora Miller**

**Manager in Consulting Human Capital**

[devmiller@deloitte.co.za](mailto:devmiller@deloitte.co.za)

+27 (0)11 202 7380

Devora Miller is a Manager in Deloitte Africa Consulting's Human Capital practice. She has driven large scale strategic change, digital adoption, and culture interventions. Devora is the Chair of the Employment Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EEDI) Forum in Deloitte Consulting, which is responsible for reflecting the interest of employees, across all diversity dimensions. She leads multiple initiatives to create awareness of EEDI and promotes inclusion, ensuring preservation of human dignity. She is passionate about developing people and believes in the human capacity for growth and transformation.