



# Discrimination, mental health and its impact on the workplace

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**W**hen Prime Minister Justin Trudeau first announced the composition of his Cabinet, he was asked why racial and gender equity is important, and his response was simple – “Because it’s 2015!”

Canada prides itself as being a nation that promotes equity, and for most Canadians, blatant and malicious forms of discrimination are universally unacceptable. Whereas overt forms of discrimination may have declined over time, research shows that the more covert and subtle forms of discrimination endure at a

systemic and institutional level.

According to the Canadian Human Rights Commission (2013), discrimination is an action or a decision that treats a person or a group negatively for reasons such as their race, gender or disability, including mental health conditions. In 2015 alone, the Canadian Human Rights Commission received over 1,200 complaints, of which approximately 75 per cent were related to discrimination in the workplace. At the organizational level, discrimination, such as racism, homophobia/transphobia and

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sexism, creates a toxic work environment that negatively affects job performance, productivity and innovation, erodes trust among employees and management, and diminishes job satisfaction. Discrimination may occur at the hiring stage (for example, not hiring an individual because of prior assumptions about their race or ethnic background); compensation and conditions of employment (for example, female workers receiving lower starting salaries); promotion practices; performance evaluations; retention decisions; and, day-to-day interactions. Often the discrimination experienced in the workplace manifests as micro-aggressions.

According to Psychologist Derald Wing Sue (2010), micro-aggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target individuals based solely upon their marginalized group membership.

For the individual, the impact of micro-aggressions and other covert and subtle forms of discrimination have a direct impact on mental health and well-being. In fact, current research suggests that the impact of subtle forms of discrimination may be as substantial, if not more substantial, than the impact of overt acts of discrimination. Researchers attribute this to the fact that the targeted individual is more easily able to externalize the negative experience of overt acts of discrimination, whereas in its subtler covert forms, the individual may internalize the experience instead, believing “the fault is mine.” Thus, the stress associated with the discriminatory act is compounded by thoughts and feelings of self-blame.

There is growing recognition among mental health practitioners on the detrimental impact of racism, homophobia/transphobia, sexism

and other forms of discrimination on the mental and physical well-being of the individual(s) being targeted. As a result, over the past few years, there have been many strategies developed across the mental health sector specifically focused on promoting equity. *Changing Directions, Changing Lives: the Mental Health Strategy for Canada* (2012) has a strategic direction focused on supporting minoritized communities in Canada, including First Nations, Inuit and Metis populations. In addition, the Mental Health Commission of Canada recently released a report titled *Case for Diversity* (2016) focused on supporting immigrant, refugee and racialized communities. In 2013, the Mental Health Commission also released the *National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace*, and subsequently released the complementary implementation guide titled *Assembling the Pieces* in 2014. These strategies



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have taken great strides towards advancing equity and are positive tools for addressing the harmful impacts of discrimination. Yet, systemic practices of discrimination continue to exist, especially in the workplace.

There is a lack of tools for employers and employees to address incidents of discrimination when they occur in the workplace, and a lack of understanding about how to support those who are injured by discrimination. Workplace discrimination should not be evaluated based on whether or not the acts were intended to cause harm, rather the impact the acts have on individuals and the organization. Subtle forms of discrimination encompass actions that are ambiguous in intent to harm, difficult to detect, and may be unintentional but are nevertheless injurious to the individuals targeted. Therefore, leaders in organizations need to increase their awareness of how discriminatory practices operate at the systemic level, organizational level and the interpersonal level between employees. One significant way to actively increase organizational awareness and understanding of racism, homophobia/transphobia, sexism and other forms of discrimination is to engage in ongoing organizational training on equity, inclusivity, and anti-racism practices.

Inspiring authentic change requires the organization to understand that addressing discrimination and building an inclusive and diverse work environment necessitates ongoing organizational reflection and action. We developed the *Authentic Change Model for Organizations*, a set of organizational assessment tools for managing inclusivity and diversity, and increasing accountability on organizational processes for addressing discrimination.

Creating authentic organizational change requires that the organization:

- Recognizes the problem (discrimination)

- Acknowledges that change needs to occur
- Commits to facilitating change
- Ensures that adequate resources are put in place
- Ensures that implementation and follow-through occurs
- Conducts routine monitoring and evaluation

The strategies for creating Authentic Change is a two-step process that consists of learning, and unlearning (Naming and Facing), and implementing strategies that reflect principles of diversity and equity (Changing).

An organization committed to practices of diversity and equity has the capacity to:

- Validate employees' experiences of oppression and does not remain silent about incidents of discrimination;
- Engage in ongoing multilateral learning so that all employees can benefit from the perspectives and knowledge of their colleagues; and,
- Recognize that addressing issues of diversity and equity requires systemic organizational change.

In our model, we assert that one of the first steps in responding to discrimination is to establish a clear definition of what discrimination is and what it looks like in overt and covert forms, and to name it when it occurs. Naming discrimination when it happens in the workplace is the first step to addressing it and creating a psychologically safe work environment. ■

*Uppala Chandrasekera, M.S.W., RSW and Lahoma Thomas, M.A., M.S.W., RSW, are the Managing Partners of Authentic Consulting, offering a variety of services for individuals, organizations and communities to help increase their capacity to name, face and address issues of access and equity, diversity and multiculturalism, inclusion and anti-oppression.*