How to Combat Marginalization to Create an Inclusive Workplace

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Have you ever been excluded from something?

Perhaps you were the last person picked in gym class, or maybe you weren't invited to an event everyone seemed to be attending. If you've been in a situation like this before, can you pinpoint any reasons (as invalid as they may be) why people or groups excluded you? How did the exclusion make you feel?

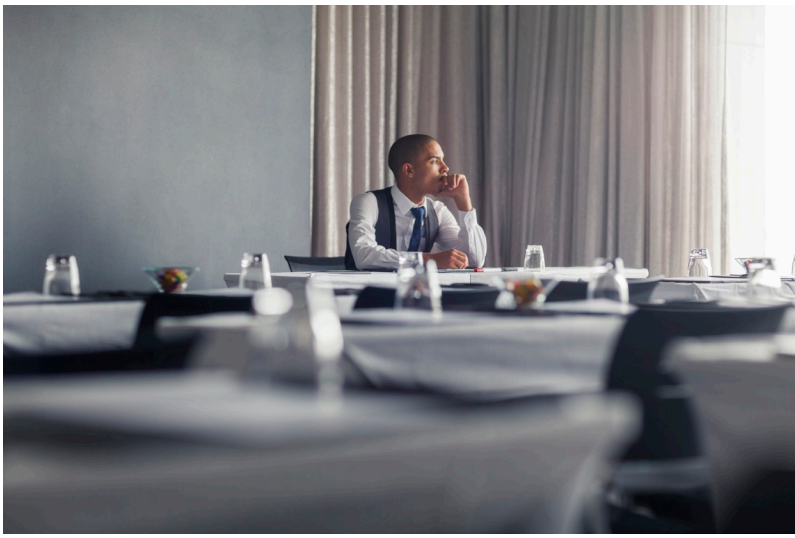
Marginalization results from discrimination and occurs when a person or group is denied or less able to access opportunities, spaces, or services. Not being included can be crushing and inhibiting on a personal level. Still, marginalization in the workplace can negatively impact company culture and lead to long-term employee engagement and retention issues.

HOW DO PEOPLE EXPERIENCE WORKPLACE MARGINALIZATION?

A marginalized employee can experience the effects of marginalization in various big and small ways, from being subtly reduced to a stereotype to even fighting for the validity of their existence. Further, marginalization disproportionally impacts underrepresented people. Some examples of how marginalization can occur in the workplace include:

» Assigning work below the education and experience levels of a non-white employee.

» Expecting the cisgender women in an office to perform "housekeeping" chores or receptionist duties.



» Leasing a new office with cube spaces that don't accommodate wheelchairs.

» Not inviting a person in their 60s to a meeting about becoming a thought leader on social media.

» Scheduling important company events during non-Christian holidays.

When these instances occur, marginalized groups can feel invisible. Despite their education or professional experience, they may feel inferior to others on the team and that their input is not valued. Over time, marginalization can negatively impact an employee's mental health and cause burnout, leading to increased turnover rates and a decline in a company's workforce diversity.

WHAT CAN INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS DO TO COMBAT WORKPLACE MARGINALIZATION?

A company needs a diverse workforce and an inclusive workplace culture to be a great place to work for all. Putting the work into creating an inclusive workplace isn't always easy, but there are actionable steps you can take in any position and at any career level.

1. Recognize the Existence of Dominant Groups

While conversations about privilege and what it means to be part of a dominant or non-dominant group can be uncomfortable and sometimes deeply painful, it's essential to recognize dominant and non-dominant groups' impacts if we want a truly inclusive workplace.

Bottom line, when you're a part of the dominant group, you have privileges, power, and access to resources that underrepresented groups don't. Generally, in today's U.S. and Canadian societies, we can characterize one such dominant group as white, male, and heterosexual. However, there may be day-to-day situations when people with these characteristics might find themselves in the non-dominant group, such as if they are:

» Over or under a particular height, weight, age, or income or education level.
» Mentally or physically disabled.
» Transgender.

Often, folks in a dominant group don't intentionally marginalize or exclude others and might not recognize more understated marginalization behaviors. However, regularly and deliberately stopping to reflect on who you may be leaving out of a meeting, event, job, sponsorship, endorsement, or another opportunity can help you be a better ally and contribute to an inclusive workplace.

2. Promote Psychological Safety

When we promote an environment of psychological safety, we create a rewarding space for marginalized groups to feel safe bringing forward constructive criticism, feedback, and ideas. Gannett Fleming has created psychological safety through several companywide channels, including:

» Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) – Our ERGs currently represent women, early-career professionals, the LGBTQ+ community, and military veterans.
» Listening Sessions & Pulse Surveys – These outlets encourage employees to share their honest thoughts and experiences on diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEI&B) topics publicly and anonymously, respectively.
» Stay Interviews – We have a "hire to retire" mentality, and our stay interviews aim to discover what would make current employees stay employed with us.

3. Model and Lead With Inclusive Behavior

The best way to combat marginalization in the workplace is to lead with vulnerability and empathy and openly and directly confront marginalizing behavior when you see it. Additionally, if you inadvertently contribute to marginalization, hold yourself accountable, apologize as is appropriate, and do better next time.

If you're a people manager, there are a few other things to remember. While you should stop marginalizing behavior if you witness it, you should have any coaching conversations in private. Intense, public lectures typically don't help in these situations, but addressing marginalization in the moment signals that your commitment to DEI&B is genuine. You should also offer private support to employees on the receiving end of the marginalizing behavior to show that you recognize the issue and want to listen and be a part of a solution.

About the Author

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About the Article

This article was written for the Gannett Fleming Insights Blog. Founded in 1915, Gannett Fleming has been a driving force in shaping infrastructure and improving communities in more than 65 countries, specializing in natural resources, transportation, water, power, and facility-related projects. The company embraces sustainability and innovation in projects and internal activities and achieves results while being responsible stewards of the environment. A results-driven firm, Gannett Fleming is consistently ranked in the top one percent of engineering firms worldwide.

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