Microinclusions improve women's workplace belonging and commitment

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New research from the University of Washington [published](#) in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, shows how "microinclusions"—brief instances of positive treatment, especially from members of the dominant group—help women feel valued at work.

Imagine your first day at a new job. You probably feel nervous, wondering how you'll fit in with the team. It's natural to worry if your co-workers will be supportive, or if they'll take your contributions seriously.

This experience is amplified for [women](#) in [technology companies](#), who often face underrepresentation and negative stereotypes about their abilities to contribute. Researchers found that microinclusive treatment increased the sense of belonging for both men and women at a technology company.

But microinclusions were most beneficial for women, whose contributions are often marginalized in the technology field. The researchers also found that microinclusions increased women's commitment to a company and reduced women's worries about being judged through the lens of a negative stereotype.

UW News talked with lead author Gregg Muragishi, a UW postdoctoral scholar of psychology, to learn more about this research.

What are microinclusions?

Muragishi: Microinclusions are about showing people that you view them in a positive way. In the workplace, new hires might ask questions about their belonging. Like, "Can I be successful here? Is this a place where I can contribute?" Microinclusions are interpersonal treatment from others that help employees answer that question in a positive and

affirming way, which helps people feel that they belong.

What are some examples you might see in the workplace?

An example could be something brief like someone saying, "Building on what Jane said…" or "I would like to hear what Jane thinks" to show Jane that her expertise is valued.

Another microinclusion example is constructive feedback. Constructive feedback is a way for a manager or peer to engage with your idea and help you build that idea by giving you support or resources. Of course, it is important for the feedback to be constructive and not just critical.

So microinclusions are not just being nice and welcoming towards people?

Exactly. Microinclusions are not necessarily nice. Some are. But their niceness is not what makes them impactful.

One study in the paper looked at socially warm interactions to show that women's sense of belonging and feeling of company commitment is not just about nice. It's not just about having team happy hours, free food, or employee resource groups (also called affinity groups).

Those support belonging, but in the paper, we show the greatest increases in belonging and company commitment when microinclusions are happening. It's only when people—women, in this case—are treated with microinclusions that they feel like they belong and want to stay working at the company.

I think that's so powerful because people sometimes think that belonging

is only about having friendly interactions and bonding as people. Those do matter, I want to be clear about that. But in this work context, when you really want to contribute, it's that microinclusion treatment that makes the difference.

Nice doesn't help people learn and grow. Nice doesn't get people promoted. Nice doesn't make people feel like they belong, especially when the question is: Can I contribute here?

What did you learn about the experiences of women in the workplace from the study's focus groups?

We heard a lot of stories from women about learning how to contribute when they first join a new company and becoming more confident in their contributions over time. In a focus group composed of women of color, we also heard stories about how they are confident they can contribute but other people won't let them. This is a little bit of where a critique of the "lean in movement" comes in.

That movement might say, if you feel you don't belong because you can't contribute then just lean in and contribute. But that's only a part of the story. You can have the skill sets and lean in, but if the people in the majority—and in tech companies, that's often white men—don't allow you to contribute, then you're blocked.

Anything else you would like to share?

Microinclusions, alone, are not a silver bullet for belonging and company commitment. It is important that companies still work towards de-biasing each level of their organization. However, microinclusions are an important step in that company journey.

One thing that stands out to me from the research is that women are more likely to recommend a company as a good place to work for other women when they're treated with microinclusions. You can imagine what the perspective of a woman may be like when she first starts working at a company. She may think, "OK, I'm one of the only women here. Can I belong here? Can I contribute here?"

But once the men treat her in a microinclusive way and she can contribute, she can tell other women, "There are not a lot of women around, but you can still be an engineer. You can still do your job. They're not blocking you." It shows how microinclusions have the potential to be the spark that ignites change within a company.

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