

The Bottom Line

It's the Micro-Messages that Help or Hurt

Question: Why haven't professionals mastered the ability to manage how others receive their messages?

Adubato: We communicate in so many different ways beyond the words we use. Every day we send hundreds of messages to others at work and at home. Yet only the most astute and aware communicators recognize how they are received and perceived. Stephen Young is the president of "Insight Education Systems" and a diversity expert. He leads a seminar entitled, "Micro-inequities: The Power of Small," which examines these "subconscious messages" sent in the workplace that often discourage and devalue workers. Young's work focuses on the often-challenging reality of communicating in a diverse professional setting (see July 3 *NJBIZ*, "Rooting Out Subtle Office Insults").

Question: So what is a "micro-inequity?"

Adubato: According to Young, some of these micro-inequities include looks, gestures or tones that are communicated around power relationships. He says it is sometimes about "giving off the vibe" that less is expected from one worker as opposed to another. Another powerful example of a detrimental micro-mes-

sage involves how a new employee is introduced to his workplace team. Sometimes the team leader will simply identify the new employee by name without saying anything about the person's talent or ability. The boss doesn't address the employee's potential contribution to the team. To make it worse, the leader will mispronounce the employee's name. Such communication has an adverse impact on the new employee as well as the entire team.

Question: So you are saying these negative micro-inequities can trickle down from the top?

Adubato: Absolutely! For example, another negative micro-message involves not greeting or saying "hello" when seeing a colleague at work. The offender often views it as "being in his own world" while the other person feels ignored and disrespected. Later that day, the two may have to work together while this undercurrent of negativity remains. Such an incident is often the beginning of a destructive history between two professionals who need to communicate and work effectively together.

Question: What are some positive micro-messages we can send?

Adubato: First, you need to be specific. Use people's names when attributing credit for

great ideas. Instead of using "he" or "she," name the person. Rather than saying they had a "good idea," state specifically what the idea was. Instead of walking with your eyes down at the ground, greet others with your eyes, your face and your voice.

If you have a tendency of only greeting certain employees you are closer to, reach out to others. Seek the opinions of others by asking questions like, "Jim, I'd like your thoughts on how we can reduce the budget by 5% in the new year." This micro-message tells Jim that you respect and appreciate his point of view and that the team needs him in order to succeed.

Question: How can these skills be used in meetings?

Adubato: When facilitating a meeting, work to get everyone involved. If Jim has offered his perspective, turn to Mary and ask, "Mary, what are your thoughts on Jim's recommendations?" Most leaders don't communicate in this fashion and their teams pay the price. Also, particularly when you are in a meeting, fight the urge to interrupt. Consistently cutting off a colleague before he has completed a statement or thought communicates that you don't respect or appreciate him or his perspective. Incessant interrupting is no small matter.

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Question: What about nonverbal speech?

Adubato: It is key that you monitor your nonverbal communication. When you roll your eyes or fold your arms tightly, it can send a more powerful message than anything you say. You are also building walls and barriers. Ask yourself how you would feel if someone did that to you.

Bottom line. As a leader, you need to be proactive and see how your micro-messages are affecting your team. Ask those whose opinion you trust and value what messages—positive and negative—they believe you are sending. Once you are aware of how you are received by others you can start making a conscious effort to improve the micro-messages you are sending to others. ♦