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MICROMESSAGES

MACROMISUNDERSTANDINGS

AVOIDING THE LITTLE THINGS THAT CAN MEAN BIG TROUBLE IN THE WORKPLACE

Candace Goforth, Beacon Journal business writer

The biggest threats to workplace equality can't be outlawed in an employee handbook. After all, how do you regulate eye contact, facial expression and tone of voice?

But, over time, these silent conversation cues can be nearly as damaging to employee morale and workplace equality as overt discrimination and harassment.

Leadership and diversity consultant Stephen Young calls these subtle messages *Microlnequities*.

"I compare it to managing the elephants while the ants walk by," said Young, founder of Insight Education Systems, a New Jersey management consulting firm. "We have done a wonderful job in corporate America of controlling the big things -- racial discrimination, blatant harassment. The elephants are under control. But we are being overrun by billions of ants that we just don't notice. These are the micromessages."

Young, former vice president and chief diversity officer for JPMorgan Chase, conducts seminars on this topic based on research conducted by Mary Rowe, adjunct professor of negotiations and conflict management at MIT.

He said these "micromessages" can be sent during any ordinary conversation and often leave one party feeling uncomfortable or misunderstood. In most cases, neither person realizes the message is even being sent.

For example, without ever saying a word, a person can tell a co-worker that he thinks her opinion is worthless. The message is sent indirectly, but clearly, in the set of his jaw and the way he folds his arms across his chest.

The colleague might walk away deflated and discouraged without even realizing why. As a result, her productivity may decline, and she'll be set up for failure. All because of body language.

None of the subtle "*Microlnequities*" will get an organization or an individual sued for harassment or discrimination. But they silently create barriers between people, instill resentment and generally create a toxic work environment, Young said.

The biggest challenge in dealing with these problems is recognizing that they exist. Organizations send their employees to diversity training seminars, and they think they've instilled some measure of sensitivity. Employees might try to implement what they've learned, but something is often missing.

"We sometimes sincerely believe all the words we say," he said. "This is where it gets dangerous. I can spout back to you everything I hear in one of those (seminars), but sometimes, the rhetoric doesn't match the reality. And the micromessages give us away."

Virtually everyone has been guilty of sending negative micromessages at one time or another, whether it be a terse, one-word answer or a slightly exaggerated sigh.

But, Young said, as soon as those micromessages are identified and understood, progress can be made.

Once they're spotted, these nuances can be addressed using a four-step approach. Young uses the acronym TALK to describe it.

Talk to yourself. (Is that tone of voice really a problem, or is it a misunderstanding?); Approach. (Consider the best way to approach the person about the perceived "*Microlnequity*." Should you say something immediately or wait until later? Should you start the discussion with a statement or ask questions?); Listen. (Give the person a chance to explain the perceived problem. Sometimes, a scowl simply can be blamed on headache); Keep communication open. (Do not close the door if things don't change immediately. This communication is a process, not an event.)

Young admits this promise of a silver bullet for work place equality is a bold one. He offers it at a time when corporations are placing increasing importance on leadership and diversity training.

According to a 2001 survey by the Society for Human Resource Management, 79 percent of human resources professionals said their organizations' leadership think diversity initiatives improve corporate culture and an organization's bottom line.

"Over the last five or six years, the practitioners within the industry have been able to use numbers and financial talk to show senior leaders that companies that are inclusive -- that promote women and minorities -- have a more lucrative stock price," said James Rector, publisher of *Profiles in Diversity Journal*, a trade publication that circulates among corporate diversity executives and is sponsoring Young's seminar in Cleveland.

And, Rector said, those companies recruit and retain happier, more productive people.

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