

MICRO-INEQUITIES: the power OF Small

“It is the subtle things that give us away.”

Steve Young, Senior Vice President of Corporate Diversity

Once an organization has traveled down the path of diversity education far enough to establish a solid foundation of awareness, where does it go next? This is a crossroads at which many businesses find themselves today, struggling to decide which path will most closely bring them to the next level of a truly inclusive workplace.

Picture diversity initiatives in the workplace as water filling a glass. When the glass is full, it begins to overflow, no longer making any progress, simply remaining at the same level. The conventional approach for most companies that have been involved with diversity for some time is that it has already enjoyed its maximum impact. The glass is now filled to capacity with awareness and appreciation of differences, which have produced a wide variety of processes, policies and programs for identifying and dealing with overt acts of discrimination or intolerance. So how do you broaden and deepen understanding when the glass is overflowing? Answer: you create a bigger container.

JPMorgan Chase believes that bigger container is all about understanding and utilizing *“The Power of Small,”* a firm-wide educational initiative that focuses on the impact of micro-messages in the workplace.

Micro-messages are small, sometimes unspoken, often unconscious messages we constantly send and receive that have a powerful impact on our interactions with others; these micro-messages can be either positive or negative. Some common examples that take place in everyday interactions include a wink of understanding from across the table, a distracted

glance at the ceiling or your watch while someone is speaking, or an interested lean forward during conversation with a colleague. In a routine 10-minute conversation, two people will send each other, on average, between 40 to 100 micro-messages.

An isolated small message may not have a large effect; repeated, they can have a massive impact. Think of individual drops of water dripping repeatedly from a faucet, eventually eroding the strong enamel on a sink. Micro-inequities are negative micro-messages that erode organizations. They are a cumulative pattern of subtle, semi-conscious, devaluing messages, which discourage and impair performance, possibly leading to damaged self-esteem and withdrawal. For example, micro-inequities can occur within a team when a manager or a colleague communicates different messages to people, usually linked to a difference between them such as race, gender, age, sexual orientation or level. As JPMorgan Chase senior vice president of corporate diversity Steve Young says, “It is the subtle things that give us away.”

Micro-messages can affect such things as employee productivity, morale, absenteeism and turnover—all critical in the success of a company. Negative micro-messages can cause employees to withdraw, complain, question their own abilities, be absent from work frequently and possibly quit; conversely, positive micro-messages can encourage employees to excel in their work, commit to the company, and feel motivated. Clearly, there’s a compelling business case for effective micro-messages.



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Individuals who belong to groups that have been historically excluded and devalued because of their difference may have stronger reactions to micro-inequities. Negative micro-messages have been referred to as an “invisible force” that goads the high turnover of women and people of color that so many corporations struggle to analyze and explain. Therefore, it becomes all the more imperative for companies to focus on the power of these small messages in order to attract and retain a more diverse workforce. The power of micro-messages is even larger when you consider the impact on business partnerships and clients.

As a global company with over 90,000 employees in 52 countries, JPMorgan Chase knows that creating an inclusive and respectful work environment is critical to its success. The product of several mergers of diverse financial services organizations, JPMC has capitalized on its skill with blending unique cultures and has approached diversity, along with many aspects of its business, with a broader scope. For JPMC, that broader scope of diversity awareness needed to span the globe—across businesses, borders and cultures. They believe that raising their collective level of understanding around micro-messages, and specifically micro-inequities, will do just that.

Sparked by research that had been performed at MIT, an internal team at JPMC realized the impact that micro-inequities could have on employees and, ultimately, on the company.

but what are you really saying?

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Partnering with key academic institutions and consulting partners, the JPMC team spent nearly two years developing a program called “*Micro-Inequities: The Power of Small.*” The program explores the impact of micro-inequities on individuals, team dynamics and the organizational culture, creating further understanding of how these subconscious messages can lead to large barriers that erode performance. Participants in “*The Power of Small*” learn how to become aware of, discuss, and address micro-inequities. Strategies for both the sender and receiver—everyone plays each role at some point—in preventing micro-inequities are taught. Prevention techniques are explained and practiced. Participants are encouraged to make a commitment to adopt these techniques as part of business as usual. In addition to developing skills to address micro-inequities in the workplace, awareness techniques are highlighted which will proactively create a more inclusive environment.

The Power of Small has been delivered over 100 times and is consistently given high marks in evaluations, highlighted as being

universally understood. During the sessions, managers have experienced significant breakthroughs as they confront the huge impact that the micro-messages they send have on their teams’ performance. Although developed in the U.S., it is a concept that is applicable across all geographies and cultures and is being adapted for incorporation into either new or existing training across the globe. JPMC views this as one of the few programs that exists today which will be perceived equally as powerful across its entire organization; truly a global diversity education offering.

Will this program create the bigger container and raise diversity awareness and skill to the next level? JPMorgan Chase believes the answer is yes. In addition to the firm focusing on the large and most visible actions that exclude, *The Power of Small* highlights the thousands of subtle messages that are communicated daily. By effectively managing these micro-messages, JPMorgan Chase seeks to dramatically reduce non-inclusive behaviors that critically impact productivity and their bottom line. ■



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