

The Little Chill

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A glance at her watch, a roll of the eye, a quick doodle: The almost imperceptible gestures researchers call microinequities can have a huge impact on the way your day, job—life—is going. LISE FUNDERBURG reports.

Being left off a group memo, in the grand scheme of things, can't compare to, say, being fired. Watching your bank teller's eyes drift off as you ask for your account balance isn't the same as being turned down for a mortgage—just as earning a big grin of confidence from your boss as you wow a client isn't winning the lottery. But for most of us, life is defined by the daily collection of small-scale slings and arrows or pats on the back. No one argues the importance of the small scale better than Stephen Young, president of Insight Education Systems, a management consulting firm in Montclair, New Jersey, and author of *Micromessaging: Why Great Leadership Goes Beyond Words*. He calls these make-or-break communications micromessages.

The 2,000 to 4,000 subtle signals we send each other every day are as automatic as breathing and often as invisible as air. They crop up in almost every human interaction. They're largely nonverbal, mostly communicated through nods, eye contact, head turns, and gestures such as glancing at your watch when another person is talking. They can be positive (microadvantages) or negative (microinequities). You can be micropraised, microadored, and microsponsored. Or microinsulted, microignored, microjudged, microgoaded, and microdismissed.

If you were to look at microinequities through a *Law & Order* lens, people would fall into one of two camps: microperps and



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microvictims. Microperps, often unwittingly, exploit the power of their positions with weapons that would pass any security checkpoint: They're the bosses who read e-mails while you're explaining a problem you're having; the doctors who ignore you, the patient, and speak to your spouse instead; the clerk who says, “May I help you?” and “Thank you” but never looks you in the eye; and the friend who starts apologies with, “If that hurt your feelings....”

A microvic is simply the person on the receiving end. He's the student who never gets called on and eventually stops raising his hand; the junior executive whose ideas are consistently met with “That won't work,” “We've tried that before,” or, worse, the complete flyover, “Anyone else?” until she stops making suggestions; and the black woman who opens the door to her large suburban home only to have the workman on the threshold look past her and ask, “Is the lady of the house here?”

Since these messages often travel on a below-the-radar frequency, they're near impossible for most of us to identify, let alone harness for good or safely disarm. Until Steve Young gets ahold of them.

Young runs a seminar called “Microinequities: The Power of Small.” It’s part communication theory and part street theater, and combines academic research with Young’s decades of experience in the corporate world, including five years as senior vice president of global diversity for JPMorgan Chase. He’s learned how to hold an audience’s attention. Today, for instance, he’s in Princeton, and he’s got a group of about 50 school administrators from New Jersey in the palm of his hand.

“Most of us believe words convey the essence of what we mean,” he says. “But words play a very small role in telling others our true opinions of them.” Micromessages make our expectations and feelings crystal clear. Young asks one principal if she’d be willing to help him with an exercise; she agrees and waits for instruction.

“Hi there,” Young says brightly from across the room, with a friendly wave of recognition. The principal smiles and waves back. Then Young’s body melts into an oleaginous slither as he turns his torso away but keeps his eyes trained on her, looking her up and down and appraising her with a heavy-lidded leer. The principal giggles at first, then squirms in her seat.

“Ooh, that’s good!” she says, realizing her discomfort is the desired outcome. When he doesn’t immediately cease, she wags a chastising finger at him. “Cut that out,” she orders, ever the principal. The room breaks into laughter.

“What did I say?” he asks the crowd.

“Nothing,” many call out, realizing that their answer makes his point.

After a short break, Young tells the principals that to understand why people perpetrate microinequities, they have to look at the roots of micromessages: the assumptions we make about our place in the world, other people’s position in the social hierarchy, or our beliefs about certain individuals and groups. Young describes a 1960s study in which Harvard social psychologist Robert Rosenthal asked a group of students to document differences between two strains of rats, one bright and one less so. The students came up with reams of evidence supporting distinctions between the two, only to find out afterward that these rats were from the same genetic line.

This phenomenon of getting the outcome you expect has come to be known as the Pygmalion effect, the way the eye of the beholder determines whether someone is a Cockney flower girl or cultured princess of mysterious provenance. Young explains that preconceived notions—about race, class, ethnicity, and gender—are essentially filters. If someone believes, for instance, that old

people can’t learn anything new, he’ll tend to notice events that confirm that opinion—and not register an older employee picking up a new skill. These “confirmed” assumptions, in turn, affect the micromessages he sends to the employee. Over time, micromessages conveying lack of confidence or impatience will hurt the worker’s performance, further reinforcing the original belief.

“When I assume you are a bright rat or a dull rat,” Young says, “my filters go into place and distort the rat’s [actual performance].” For the principals, all of whom struggle to close the insidious, widely reported achievement gap between white and non-white students, Young links this last point to the education system. “Most students learn by second or third grade whether they’re seen as a bright rat or a dull rat,” he says. “And rats perceived to be dull begin to meet that expectation.” The principals, who had been laughing a minute earlier, are now absolutely silent, many nodding in agreement.

To show how people can be influenced by someone else’s behavior, Young asks the principals to pair off. One person is told to give generic job interview information—current position, responsibilities, challenges—while the other listens. The listener is instructed to give her full attention:

She looks the speaker in the eye, nods, smiles encouragingly, and never interrupts. Then, on a predetermined cue, the speaker describes his last job, and the listener switches into fidget mode. She looks around, checks her cell phone, BlackBerry, calendar—anything she can come up with to appear disinterested or bored while the speaker keeps talking.

“Be creative,” Young advises the listeners. “Anything short of leaving the room.”

At the experiment’s end, Young canvasses the speakers. How was your performance in the first half of the experiment, he asks, on a scale of one to five? “Five,” most people answer. And in the second half? “Zero,” some say. Others pipe up with “One” and “Negative five.” The speakers report that they grew angry, lost their train of thought, and started rambling when the listeners turned inattentive. “I was bored,” marvels one speaker about the second portion of the experiment, “and I was talking about my own stuff!”

Young mentions that he once paired up to do the exercise with the CEO of a Fortune 500 company who said he wanted to punch Young when he started to get antsy. “I can see what this would do in an interview situation,” says one administrator. “If someone isn’t listening, the candidate might start babbling and seem like an idiot. And that person may have been someone of value.”



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The amazing thing about this exercise, Young reminds them, is that the participants know what's going on—they're not being duped about rat smarts—and still they end up faltering. "The point here," Young tells the group, "is how clearly your performance was affected by how you were being listened to." Skill had nothing to do with race, gender, age, or sexual orientation—simply the quality of someone else's attention.

The term *microinequities* was coined in 1973 by Mary Rowe, PhD, currently the ombudsperson and adjunct professor of management at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She arrived at MIT expecting to address policy-level problems of racial and gender exclusion. She found that one essential problem that kept people of color and women from coming into the institution and thriving was what happened to them in the halls and by the watercooler.

"In my first week at MIT," Rowe remembers, "an African-American woman came to my office and said, 'Everybody's polite to me, but the place is still so cold.'" Rowe asked the woman to keep a diary, which they'd then review. When the woman returned after several weeks, the diary's pages were blank.

"She said, 'No one has spoken to me,'" Rowe says. "The problem wasn't that anyone was rude or mean or unpleasant; it was that she felt invisible. It was just awful for her." Rowe kept happening on similar experiences, and a pattern emerged linking positive small-scale interactions to productivity and success in recruitment. At MIT, Rowe saw one white department head make his department ranks swell with women and minorities. He did it through the tiniest of steps: striking up conversations on planes when he was seated next to a person of color, seeking out women at conferences and asking them about their work, and giving new employees close and constant attention.

This professor, Rowe explains, intuitively conferred micro-affirmations, the discreet behaviors that offer encouragement, bring out the best in people, make them strive to do better, and elicit their loyalty and trust.

What struck Young about Rowe's theories was how tangible they were, and how widely applicable. Over the years, Young has seen plenty of diversity training programs come and go. Most suffer from well-intentioned but hard-to-apply core themes—"Everyone is of value" or "In diversity lies strength." Young has embraced and built upon Rowe's work, in part because it addresses the ways in which people continue to be discriminated against. Although our country has made great strides in terms of legislating equal access—women can vote and anyone can drink from any water fountain—the interpersonal acts of discrimination have been much harder to tackle. "We've done a great job of managing the elephants while the ants walk by," he says. The labeling of microinequities gives people the means to identify and then address these lingering prejudices.

But what also excites Young about Rowe's theories is how they encompass the insensitivities that result from an imbalance of power between two people—and who on this planet hasn't been on both sides of that equation? A boss can interrupt an underling, and the underling can't retaliate. A nanny has to deal with the difficult working mother who writes her check, but that same mother has to accommodate a hidebound boss. "Microinequities apply to everyone," says Young. It's just a question of making people see that universality, which Young says is possible. One of his proudest moments, in fact, came after a training session several years ago. As two high-ranking white male executives walked out of the room, one said to the other, "For the first time this HR stuff was really worthwhile."

So how does Young get two powerful executives to identify their own microdomineering tendencies? One method is by playing a training video—a staged office meeting—that's a festival of microinequities. The boss nudges an employee sitting next to him (clearly his favorite); he doesn't pay attention to some underlings, neglects to identify others by name, and doesn't focus on one's presentation.

Afterward, Young asks the group to describe what happened. The school administrators agree that the boss—a microperp extraordinaire—needs to seriously examine the messages he's sending out, and they correctly identify a number of his power blunders. "If you're in a leadership position," Young says, "you have the power to change the tone of the room, simply by using microadvantages." He gives examples, such as paying attention, maintaining eye contact, not interrupting, and soliciting input from everyone during meetings. (Remember, after all, what happened to those poor, unlistened-to principals.) He says that responding to someone's idea with a question—"How would that work?"—is more likely to keep communication flowing than the boss in the video's knee-capping response of

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"That's a bad idea." He also notes that a boss could invite someone to sit next to him who wouldn't ordinarily choose that seat. He reminds the group that it's the responsibility of the person in power to be conscious of her facial expressions. If you're frowning your brow, letting your eyes drift, you're sending a signal, he says. Even silence—as was the case for Mary Rowe's colleague at MIT—can be loaded. "We send more messages to the people we like and agree with," Young explains, "so if you're not getting the message, you're getting a message."

By the end of Young's seminar, managers are shocked to have discovered their inner microperps; recipients of microinequities are relieved to finally put a finger on the imperceptible slights and obstacles they've had to stumble over. One principal, leaving the Princeton meeting, seems slightly awestruck. "This is powerful and frightening," she says. Indeed, Young acknowledges, "This gets to the DNA of culture change. But if we want to be a caring democratic society, what choice do we have?" ■