

Engaging Employees: Pay Attention to Messages You're Overlooking

By Brigid Moynahan

A significant yet hidden challenge facing businesses today is the impact of microinequities—small, subtle signals we send other people through our words and behavior that cause them to feel discounted, excluded, or devalued. These little put downs and acts of exclusion pile up, reducing productivity, communication and job satisfaction. Like water over a rock, microinequities have the power to slowly and methodically erode employee motivation and sense of self-worth. The end result costs companies millions of dollars in lowered productivity, absenteeism and the loss of valuable employees.



How Pervasive are Microinequities?

Like it or not, all of us commit microinequities. Do you go to lunch with the same people every day or meet the same group after work? Ever rolled your eyes at a co-worker's "off the wall" comments, only to later find yourself praising that same idea when offered by someone you trust? Do you share information with close colleagues, but delay in telling others? Do you rely on the same few people to get a job done rather than involving a broader, more diverse group? Ever deliberately leave someone off a group email? How about checking your watch mid-conversation just to let the other person know they are boring you to death?

When we use these subtle (and occasionally not-so-subtle) behaviors to exclude or devalue others we're engaging in microinequities. And though they can be hurtful, they are a routine part of life. Behavioral studies have shown that we tend to bond with those who look, sound, and act like us, and steer away from those who don't. This is the case with every one of us, making microinequities a universal issue. We've all committed acts of exclusion in the past, and we've all been recipients of those same de-valuing behaviors.

Reducing them is critical to creating an inclusive corporate culture.

Don't We Have Enough To Worry About?

With the economy in crisis and companies fighting just to stay in business, do we really have to bother about something as small as a microinequity? Actually microinequities become an even more serious problem in times like these because they tend to multiply when people are under

stress and begin to neglect their relationships. I'm often asked what makes a microinequity different from run of the mill rudeness. To understand the difference, focus on the second part of the term—the "inequity". Rude behavior may be unpleasant, but it doesn't become a microinequity unless it undermines the equality of others by walling them out, damaging morale and contribution.

Embracing Difference: Breaking the Mold

Given our natural preference for the similar, finding ways to bring people together who look, sound, think, and react in different ways can be a lot of work. As a client at Shell said recently, "It's so much easier working with people who think and act just like you do. But the easiest way isn't necessarily the best way." Supporting that statement, recent research findings note that diverse teams are from three to five times more productive than homogeneous ones. They are also more innovative because creative answers come from accepting and leveraging new or different ideas.

"Microinequities exert influence both by walling out the 'different' person, and by making the person of difference less effective," explains Rowe, the MIT ombudsperson who for the past three decades has worked to educate individuals and organizations on the topic. In other words, microinequities can lead to poor employee performance—when a manager has low expectations, explains Rowe, "employees have a tendency to deliver what is expected of them." It's a downward spiral; the more I behave in ways that devalue you, the less confident you feel. The less confident you feel, the less you'll risk confronting issues or contributing innovative ideas. And the less you contribute, the less I'll value you.

The business case for eliminating microinequities lies in the negative impact they have on employee engagement. The Gallup organization has found that engagement is the biggest factor in determining a company's long term success. Over the years, Rowe has found that a major cause of employee attrition is that people feel "left out", or that their organization's culture is "cold". Whether or not employees feel engaged at work most often boils down to how well they are treated by the people around them. When they feel devalued by microinequities, their engagement plunges. When they feel encouraged by valuing behaviors, or what Mary Rowe calls "micro-affirmations", engagement builds. We validate this connection every day in our workshops on micro-messages when we poll employees about what makes them feel valued and devalued at work. Inevitably, in every group, people focus most on the daily messages they receive from others and whether it encourages or discourages their contribution.

Gallup Corporation data from a survey of 1 million employees worldwide shows that actively disengaged workers are less productive and more stressed than their engaged peers, have seven times more healthcare needs, and are three times more likely to quit. Inversely, companies where a majority of employees said they felt valued by teammates and supervisors had higher morale, retention, productivity, and profits.

Instituting Change

Recently, major companies like JPMorgan Chase, Chubb, Shell, and Johnson & Johnson have instituted training on microinequities in their global efforts to promote inclusion and diversity. These companies understand microinequities are indiscriminate—occurring in all cultures, within both genders and every age group.

Acknowledging the importance of microinequities is the first step to healing the damage they cause. The second is counteracting their effects by teaching people to use valuing behavior or what Rowe calls "micro-affirmations. Our firsthand experience delivering training in microinequities and micro-affirmations in hundreds of companies points to the benefits of this positive approach. Participants in our Count Me In programs report that training results in improved communications with supervision, better collaboration with team mates, and an increased sense of belonging and accountability..

At Chubb & Son, where “Count Me In®” training has been offered company wide, organization leaders are finding that micro-messages have universal application in improving engagement at all levels. Says Kathleen Marvel, Chief Diversity Officer and Senior Vice President of Chubb, “Count Me In® has the potential to address the concerns of international audiences as well as domestic. It encourages employees to speak from their own experiences about specific ways they feel included or excluded,” and they “leave knowing that inclusion is all about them, that they can make a difference. It is a key component of our diversity strategy because it gets us to walk the talk and results in visible changes in behavior that improve the climate.”

Making sure employees are fully engaged is absolutely critical for companies seeking to weather the storm of today’s business environment. The good news is that we can accomplish this in simple ways, just by teaching people the power of the little things they do.

The top 5 factors affecting employee morale:

- Having the opportunity to contribute
- Being included in the decision-making progress
- Being listened to
- Being thanked
- Getting credit for ones ideas

Do’s and Don’ts to Eliminating Microinequities:

Don’t:

- Ignore, dismiss, interrupt, or talk over others
- Get distracted with multitasking
- Critique with nonverbal behavior, like rolling of the eyes or checking ones watch
- Let stress undermine relationships
- Fail to respond when others seek input

Do:

- Take the time to listen with attention and respect
- Seek input and credit people’s contributions
- Share the floor using inclusive meeting procedures
- Use micro-affirmations often

Working as a Team:

Start a team discussion using the questions below. Go around the table asking each person to contribute. Then build a list of guidelines to ensure more positive interactions:

What is something we can start doing to make people feel respected and valued here?

What is something we can stop doing that causes people to feel excluded or overlooked?

What do we need to understand about the cultural and global differences that exist here?

What can we do to encourage greater participation?

Video-based Training on Microinequities and Micro-affirmations

Current state of the art video training on this topic is a DVD program entitled Little Things Mean A Lot, featuring Brigid Moynahan and offered through Learning Communications. This program combines a compelling business case with practical strategies individuals, teams and leaders can use to counter microinequities while building high performance work environments.

- * Recognize that the way we treat each other at work - the little things we do - has a big impact.
- * Learn to respond effectively to negative messages (microinequities) that can undermine our success.
- * Equip yourself with simple tools and strategies to make the workplace more inclusive.

For more information contact Learning Communications at 800-622-3610 or www.learncom.com.

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About the author:

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A constant innovator, Brigid brings powerful new thinking and practices to her work with corporations. She has designed more than 1,000 programs on mentoring, coaching, team building, diversity, and leadership. Her work has been profiled in Working Woman Magazine, Chief Learning Officer, and the Wall Street Journal.

Before founding her consulting practice, she served as an executive with Burson-Marsteller and the American Management Association in New York City. She has taught communications at The New School for Social Research and The City College of New York.