

MICRO-INEQUITIES: The Power of Small

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What can be done to really shift diversity into a new high gear? Doing more of the same activities that have brought us to our current levels of progress, aren't likely to drive a conscious evolution and new rapid cultural change.

Throughout corporate America, and recently in a fast-growing number of countries across the globe, we have seen diversity awareness training, corporate inclusion policies, "PC" compliance and, in many organizations, a genuine understanding of the impact diversity can have on strengthening a business's bottom-line. But, why aren't we seeing more progress?

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. Pouring from the same pitcher into the same glass no longer captures capacity and makes no progress. Is the diversity glass now filled to capacity with awareness and appreciation of differences? Has the effort produced enough policies and programs for identifying and dealing with overt acts of discrimination

JPMorgan Chase heightens understanding by utilizing "The Power of Small," a firm-wide educational initiative that focuses on the impact of micro-messages in the workplace.

or intolerance? So how do we shift momentum into a new high gear and capture what's being lost in the overflow? Answer: you create a bigger container.

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.

JPMorgan Chase believes that bigger container is all about understanding and utilizing "The Power of Small," the impact of micro-messages in the workplace.

Micro-messages are small, subtle, sometimes unspoken, often unconscious messages we routinely send and receive that have a powerful impact on our interactions with others; these micro-messages can be either positive or negative. They are looks, gestures, inflections, nuance and an infinite number of methods that reveal how we really feel about someone. Some common examples include a wink of understanding from across the table for one colleague and a distracted glance at the ceiling toward another.

Micro-messages range from the head nod that says "yes," to the head turn that says, "I couldn't care less." It could be a smile of engagement or a blank look of indifference; an interested lean forward during conversation with a colleague or a curt dismissive response.

Micro-messages assert a powerful influence on the behavior of colleagues and, ultimately, the receiver's performance. In a routine ten-minute conversation between two people, they are likely to send between 40 and 120 of these 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 even enamel on a sink. Negative micro-messages, "micro-inequities," 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 team members, often linked to differences between them

such as race, gender, age, sexual orientation or level.

Micro-messages have a direct effect on employee productivity, morale, absenteeism and turnover – all critical in the success of a company. Negative micro-messages erode confidence, commitment and motivation. Positive micro-messages can spark creativity, leadership and exceptional performance. Positive micro-messages can also motivate employees to excel and commit to the company. Clearly, **there's a compelling business case for managing effective micro-messages.**

The hard truth is people strive to live up to the expectations communicated to them particularly when the message is cumulative and reinforced. Conversely, there is a tendency to live down to expectations when the reinforced message instead is lack of confidence. People 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 and, most importantly, develop their entire workforce. The power of micro-messages is even larger when you consider the impact on business partnerships and clients.

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As a global company operating in 52 countries, JPMorgan Chase believes that creating an inclusive and respectful work environment is critical to the firm's success. The product of several mergers of diverse financial services organizations, JPMorgan Chase has worked to capitalize on the experience of blending unique cultures. It was clear that broader scope of diversity awareness also needed to span the globe—across businesses, borders and cultures. The skill of managing micro-messages has value in every global culture. It may be how long or how deep one bows in certain Asian centers or other ways we subtly communicate, everyone sends and receives messages that reveal underlying beliefs. Sparked by research initiated at Massachusetts Institute of Technology,

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JPMorgan Chase recognized the impact that micro-messages could have on employees and, ultimately, the company. Partnering with key academic institutions and consulting partners, the JPMorgan Chase 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 identify, discuss, and address micro-inequities.**

After nearly a decade in the diversity arena, I was struck by the impact this program had on me and virtually everyone experiencing it. I haven't decided if it was a good or bad thing to have taught my teenage daughter about the concept. Just as children have the capacity to learn new languages, they have a remarkable ability to learn, master and, in this case, challenge anyone who slips down the micro-inequity slope. Recently, my fifteen-year-old and I were having one of those heart to heart "Dad/daughter" discussions. I expressed a strong condemnation of one of her less-than honorable friends. Admittedly, the remark was a bit darker than may have been necessary and was swiftly met with a demand for an apology. I conceded, "Fine then, if you were offended, I'm very sorry."

I watched the Frankenstein monster lift from the table and come to life before my eyes. "Dad, did you hear that micro-inequity?" I knew I was doomed but was enjoying the experience. "First of all, you completely lost eye-contact the moment you started your apology." I was told, in academic research level detail, the interpretation of my gestures, tone and choice of words, especially my use of "if."

"Dad, using the word 'if' sent me the clearest message of all that you weren't sincere." I suppose I hadn't had enough: I asked her to explain the "if" remark a bit further.

"When you bump into someone on the street, do you ever turn and say,

‘if that hurt, I’m sorry?’ I’m having a hard time picturing you knocking over someone’s cup of coffee and saying, “If that caused a problem, I’m very sorry.” You would immediately look them in the eye and genuinely apologize and every micro-message would reinforce that you meant it!”

At some point, we’ve all received conditional apologies like the one I offered. You may have walked away feeling something was missing but not being able to put your finger on exactly what. After all, the right words were said.

In this particular situation, calling my hand to the details of my micro-messages opened a new discussion about my real feelings. We may not have ended in agreement but our views were more clearly understood and mutually respected—a powerful benefit, applicable in any business setting.

The Power of Small is being delivered throughout the firm with broad acceptance as a truly global application of diversity. During the sessions, managers have experienced significant breakthroughs as they recognize the impact the micro-messages they send have on individual performance. Although developed in the U.S., it is a concept that is applicable across all geographies and cultures and is being adopted for incorporation into either new or existing training across the globe. JPMorgan Chase views this as one of the key programs that exists today which will be perceived equally as powerful throughout our entire organization.

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Will this program create the bigger container and raise diversity awareness and skill generating rapid, real behavior change? JPMorgan Chase believes the answer is yes. For individuals and organizations to move diversity to the next level, we need to learn how to tune into the frequency of micro-messages. Radio, TV and other broadcast waves float in our presence everyday but we’re unable to see or hear the messages they carry. When we use the appropriate device, however, we’re able to tune into the frequency and see or hear the message with perfect clarity. Micro-messages often travel in our presence with similar obscurity. When we learn the frequency to identify and control micro-messages the

new water we capture will become fuel that powers new realms of performance and productivity across business, borders and culture.

Stephen Young is Senior Vice President, Global Diversity for JPMorgan Chase. He is responsible for the firm's Global Diversity initiative including strategy, education, measurement, employee involvement and external relationships. A noted author and speaker, Young is former chairman of the Securities Industry Association's Diversity Committee, has served on the Diversity Committee for the United Way of America and is an advisory board member to Rev. Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Push Coalition-Wall Street Project. For more information about Micro-Inequities, The Power of Small, organizations can contact ; Stephen.Young@Chase.com.



For Discussion:

1. A microinequity can be a message contained in an action, a comment, or a even a policy. Usually, the sender of the message does not understand that it has occurred; often, the receiver doesn't either, but is left with a perceived "lack of fairness." Can you pinpoint any messages you may have received unintentionally by a colleague or by "business as usual" practices that had left you feeling uneasy?

2. A study by MIT in the mid '90s found that their tenured women professors felt marginalized and excluded from the working of their department due largely to microinequities. "Much of the unhappiness," said then Dean of Sciences Robert Birgeneau, "originated in 'daily insults'—mostly unintended—and in obvious things like office space." The study showed, for example, women faculty in the science department were asked to teach, rather than being included in research; when professors were tenured, male professors were given larger offices, while female were not; and in more than 10 years, the growth of the female faculty members had remained at only 7.1% of the total population. Subsequent studies at Harvard have found similar microinequities within their programs. "The data part of our reports had been overrated," said Birgeneau. "The descriptive part (when measuring these discrepancies) is as important as the objective part." * How closely have you listened for "the descriptive part" when doing diversity surveys within your organization? What could you ask that could help your staff get to the heart of any "feelings of unfairness" your associates may have?

2. **Micro-message can be positive, as well as negative.** This is why personal contact is so important, especially when delivering a message that could be read many ways. Let your non-verbal messages say volumes about you, and what you have to say. Take an assessment of yourself when speaking. Do your hand gestures draw people in, or turn them away? What are you saying with your eyes? Have there been times what you have said has been misunderstood, and you have had to clarify during your conversation? Was there anything in your “body language” that could have been countering your verbal message? _____

* from “Tenured Women Battle to Make it Less Lonely at the Top,” by Andrew Lawler, *Science Magazine*, November 12, 1999