



Executive Action

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Diversity in the Workplace . . .

Go Ahead: Sweat the Small Stuff

by Brigid Moynahan

Microinequities may be small, but they pose a major issue for businesses today. Left unchecked, these inequities will accumulate and become a drag on employee productivity, corporate culture, and, ultimately, a company's ability to keep top talent.

Things small and nearly undetectable may be undermining your corporate culture. On the surface, negative comments and subtle put-downs that create a divisive feeling among co-workers may seem unavoidable and inconsequential. Yet, like water over a rock, these exclusionary behaviors, or microinequities, have the power to slowly and methodically erode a person's motivation and sense of worth. The end result costs companies millions of dollars in low productivity, absenteeism, and poor employee retention.

Saturday Golf, Tuesday Lunches— What's the Harm?

Most of us have probably (and unwittingly) engaged in some form of exclusionary behavior. Do you tend to "lunch" with the same people? Or meet with the same group after work? Have you ever rolled your eyes at one co-worker's "off the wall" comments, then found yourself praising that same idea when offered by someone you trust? Do you share certain information with close colleagues, but delay in telling others at the same level? Do you rely on the same trusted allies to get a tough job done rather than involving a broader, more diverse group to help? Do you golf with colleagues who look and act just like you? Ever deliberately leave someone off the email distribution?

These subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) behaviors we use to wall out differences are all examples of microinequities. What's the harm in always having lunch with Tom? Or "forgetting" to cc: a co-worker? The harm, of course, is felt by those left out—those who have been treated inequitably.

Valuing Differences: It's Harder Than You Think

"We Value Differences" is the diversity mantra in most organizations. The problem is, we typically do not like differences. Behavioral studies show that we tend to bond with others who look and act like we do, and steer away from those who are different. We socialize with people who do what we do, think like we think, even look like we look. It's no coincidence that "like" means to be similar.

"Microinequities exert their influence both by walling out the 'different' person, and by making the person of difference less effective," explains Mary Rowe, Ombudsman and Adjunct Professor of Negotiation and Conflict Management at the MIT Sloan School of Management. Rowe "coined" the term microinequities and for the past three decades has worked to educate individuals on the topic.

Ask a departing employee why they chose to leave their job. You're likely to hear complaints about a devaluing manager or a feeling of "not fitting in" rather than talk of pay and benefits. That sense of exclusion, of being outside the "in crowd," results in employees devaluing their work, their contributions, and their connection to their team and employer. A recent survey of 5,000 U.S. households for The Conference Board conducted by TNS NFO, one of the TNS group of companies, found that only half of all Americans today say they are satisfied with their jobs, down from nearly 60 percent in 1995. Just 52 percent of workers express satisfaction with their supervisors, down from 56 percent in 1995.

Another research report by The Conference Board (*Voices of Experience: Mature Workers in the Future Workforce*, Report R-1319) found that a quarter of older workers who said they planned to retire within five years were doing so because they were "not respected" in their current job. The report found that supervisory relationships were a key "derailment" factor for older workers.

And finally, a recent Gallup poll of over 1 million employees from a range of companies worldwide asked twelve key questions to determine a company's success. Most of these questions could be boiled down to just one: Do employees feel valued at work by their teammates and supervisors? Companies that received a majority of "yes" answers had high employee morale, retention, productivity and, consequently, profits.

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."

Starting Team Dialogue

Having a dialogue with your team about behaviors that include or exclude people is one way to get people talking about how to build teamwork and eliminate microinequities. Here are some questions to get the dialogue started:

- Do you feel ...included ...respected ...valued?
- What behaviors wall people out?
- What behaviors encourage contribution?
- What can we start, stop, do more of?
- What can I do differently?
- What can the team do differently?
- What can senior management do differently?

Think About Your Behavior

Each of us sees the world from our own unique lens. We look for what is expected, and when we get something different, our first reaction is often to reject those differences using exclusionary behavior. The response may not be overly dramatic: You may fail to respond to the person's point, or forget to include *him* in a meeting, or interrupt and change the subject when *she* is speaking.

“Microinequities can predispose a manager to even worse behavior,” adds Rowe. “We begin to see ‘through’ people and not recognize their contributions because they are different. It also may lead to overlooking someone who might be best qualified for promotion.”

Often, the approach we take at work is to tackle issues in the easiest, most efficient way possible. But, of course, that approach does not always deliver the best outcome—either for employees or the company. While it may be easier to get to a solution with five people who think exactly like you do than with five people who think differently, it may not be the best solution for your organization.

To prevent microinequities, we must first examine our personal lenses—the ones that may be clouding our judgment when it comes to assessing other people and ideas. For example, if you were raised in a household where talking back was frowned upon, you may dismiss as combative those who thrive on resolving issues through open debate. Or, if your experience tells you the best style of leadership is authoritative, then you may stereotype a co-worker as weak because they lead with a collaborative style. It's likely you will fail to perceive that person's leadership contributions. And if others in your company think like you do, the organization will probably end up limiting itself to one rigid style of leadership, creating a bias against differences that stops the advancement of diverse candidates.

Changing Behaviors, Changing Business

Oftentimes it takes a serious threat (like a million dollar judgment) for businesses to take steps to eradicate a problem. Before there was a name for sexual harassment, people often thought they had to just “put up with it.” But once the behavior was given a name and legal definition, corporations began to sit up and take notice. Today, companies invest billions of dollars in sexual harassment training. Do a Google search for the term “sexual harassment” and you receive more than 4 million “hits.” Search the term “microinequities”, and only 500 hits appear. Awareness within corporations is just beginning to increase as a result of inclusion training as well as other initiatives.

Feeling Like an Outsider? Take Action

To ensure people value and include you, it is important to get comfortable with a range of assertion strategies. When someone interrupts you, set a limit by simply telling the person you are not finished speaking. Left off a distribution list? Instead of allowing the action to erode your self-esteem, go to the person sending the message and ask to be included next time. Don't over react. It is best to allow the person to “save face” by assuming the microinequity was unintentional. A small act of exclusion might not warrant a long and deep discussion. Often, it is simply enough to ask for a change in behavior. If the behavior was unintentional, the person will probably stop. On the other hand, if the person continues excluding you, more serious intervention may be required. You may want to take the person aside to iron out the issues in your professional relationship. If this doesn't work, you may need to seek outside support from a supervisor or HR manager.

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