



National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity STEM Equity Pipeline

Topic: Micromessages, Micro-inequities, and Micro-affirmations

Unit: Micromessages

Introduction

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Ombudsperson and Adjunct Professor Dr. Mary Rowe began research in the field of micromessaging in 1973, when the school's president and chancellor charged her with identifying ways to improve the workplace climate for underrepresented faculty and staff. She discovered that the small, subtle, often semi-conscious messages we send while communicating with others, whether it be by voice, action, or body language, have a significant impact on relationships. Rowe found that micro-inequities (negative micromessages)—“covert, hard-to-prove, unintentional events, frequently unrecognized by the perpetrator, which occur wherever people are perceived to be ‘different’”—not only had a damaging impact on MIT but also proved to be “a principal scaffolding for discrimination in the U.S.” To foster a positive, more meaningful experience for women and persons of color at MIT, Rowe found that sending micro-affirmations (positive micromessages)—“small, ephemeral, hard-to-see, often unconscious events which occur wherever people wish to help others succeed”—would serve well to curb inequities and create a healthful experience for everyone on campus.

Micromessages are subtle nonverbal messages that people send through body language, tone of voice and the way they inflect words.

Stephen Young, *Micromessaging: Why Great Leadership Is Beyond Words*

Illustrations and Examples

A recent Stanford University study centered on culture and conversation explains that micro-inequities persist “because it is human nature for people to try to find common ground when talking to others, simple everyday conversations could have the unfortunate side effect of blocking many of the best and most innovative ideas from the collective social consciousness.” In other words, when individuals form a group based on the false perception that all those not in the group are somehow different from them, the message received by others is that he or she is somehow inadequate or unworthy of meaningful participation. Professor Carol Bliss, from California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, values teaching at “one of the most diverse campuses” in California and recognizes that many of her students, because of their race, have been subjected to routine micro-inequities. To counteract her students feeling excluded within the classroom setting and to demonstrate that each student has substance, Bliss begins each semester by prompting her students to write their most important values on the board. This practice illustrates that even though many of them come from varying cultural upbringings, they maintain similar values that connect them as human beings. It is in identifying those shared values that students are affirmed to be “more similar than dissimilar and helps to create a bond for the rest of [their] time together.” Bliss observes, “Once a classroom becomes connected, it then becomes easier to transfer empathy and respect to people and experiences outside the classroom.” Students become more outgoing, participate excitedly in class, and share their feelings of being welcomed with others in and outside of Bliss's classroom.

Successful Research-based Strategies

- Create a new awareness of micromessages in the classroom and on the campus through discussion with peers, colleagues, and students.
- Be cognizant of “little issues”; don't allow them to damage relationships. Speak and spell a person's name correctly, make eye contact when conversing, and always be friendly and attentive.
- Consider that different populations perceive micro-inequities differently and that not all things mean the same to all people.
- Don't let micro-inequities go unnoticed. Find a way to acknowledge the occurrence, and address it in a positive way.
- Before teaching a new concept, have your students reflect on a positive experience they had while learning something new as a way to affirm their ability to learn.



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References and Bibliography

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- Rowe, M. (2008). Micro-affirmations & micro-inequities. *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association* 1. <http://www.fctl.ucf.edu/events/winterconference/2008/content/Monday/microaffirmations.pdf>.