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# Microinequities

## When Small Sights Lead to Huge Problems in the Workplace

BY ERIC L. HINTON | © DiversityInc Media, 2003

**IMAGINE FOR A** moment you're sitting at your desk when you see your boss walking around the office introducing a new hire to all the current staff members. At each stop, your boss spends several minutes exulting in the various accom-

plishments of each of your co-workers and rejoicing in what a valuable member of the team he or she is. Then, when your boss approaches you, he simply identifies you by name (which he mispronounces) and says you've been with the company for a

year (when you've actually been there for three), before quickly moving along.

As you now ponder whether it's time to update your résumé, that sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach has a name. You've just been the victim of a microinequity,

STEPHEN YOUNG | JPMORGAN CHASE





PHILIPPE CHENG

says Stephen Young, senior vice president of corporate diversity for JPMorgan Chase. Over the past few years, Young has become a personal crusader, preaching to corporations the destructive consequences of employers and co-workers who exhibit forms of exclusion, both implied and overt, in the workplace.

A microinequity is defined as a subtle message, sometimes subconscious, that devalues, discourages and ultimately impairs performance in the workplace. These messages can take the shape of looks, gestures or even tones. The cumulative effect of microinequities often leads to damaged self-esteem and, eventually, withdrawal from co-workers in the office.

"Most companies' diversity efforts focus on what is most obvious. They focus on what you can see, touch or put your hands around," says Young. "What we are finding is that the semiconscious messages that often are sent out are far more persuasive and potentially damaging."

It's increasingly important to recognize the vast power of the small slight, says Young. It's quite apparent when a large gaffe causes uneasiness in the office environment. Because those blunders are obvious, a quick remedy usually is offered. If an employee refers to a co-worker with

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an ethnically disparaging term, at the very least that employee would find himself or herself headed for an intense round of sensitivity training if not outright termination. But if that same employee simply speaks to his or her co-worker in a condescending manner or gives off the vibe that less is expected of him or her than other co-workers, the results could be equally devastating, but more difficult to address.

It's the very subtlety involved with microinequities that often lead those on the receiving end of them to question if they truly are being treated differently from other co-workers or if they are being overly sensitive or downright paranoid.

For instance, if you see that your boss listens intently when having a conversation with a co-worker, but often appears distracted when having a conversation with you, should it be taken personally? Perhaps, says Young. "A turn of the head

sends the message that you couldn't care less what that person was saying," he says.

Microinequities also differ from culture to culture. For instance, in Asian cultures, where bowing is a sign of respect, there also is a great deal of significance placed upon who bows first, how long you remain bowed, how deeply you bow and even your facial reaction when you raise your head. "Everything sends a message," says Young.

Individuals send anywhere from 40 to 150 micromessages to each other in an average 10-minute conversation. When these micromessages take the form of microinequities, they can take various forms, some less obvious than others. They may include behaviors that communicate a lower level of expectation in performance or exclusion from company meetings or discussions.

Mary P. Rowe, special assistant to the president and adjunct professor at the

## ■ Diversity Management

Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has been studying microinequities for 30 years. Rowe believes this form of subtle discrimination remains the "principal scaffolding for segregation" in the nation.

"Microinequities occur wherever people are perceived to be different. That can be Caucasians in a Japanese-owned company, African Americans in a white firm, women in a traditionally male environment, Jews and Muslims in a traditionally Protestant environment," she says. "These mechanisms of prejudice against persons of difference are usually small in nature, but not trivial in effect. They are especially powerful taken together."

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Rowe believes microinequities also may have a negative quality. That is, the expectation of poor performance may do damage because managers, students and employees have a strong tendency to do exactly what is

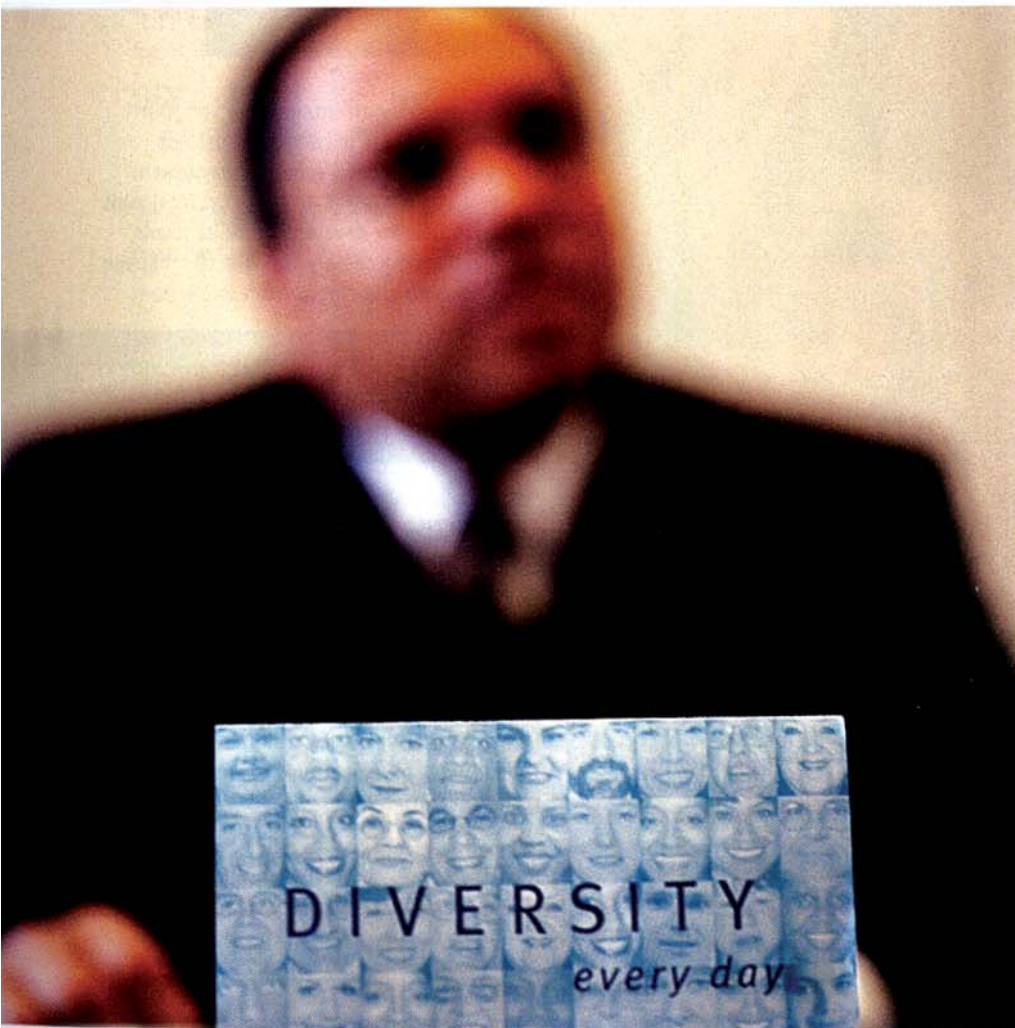
expected of them. "The Asian American who is expected to be docile may later be thought not to be sufficiently assertive," she says.

Adds Young, "It's very hard to get away from the expectation that you are supposed to be less than."

Both Young and Rowe agree the only way to deal with microinequities is to bring them to the forefront through discussion. If an employee feels he or she is being excluded or treated differently than his or her peers, it's his or her responsibility to see that the issue is addressed. Employers then have an obligation to make sure those concerns are fully addressed once raised.

"What an employer can do is recognize the importance of microinequities. Subtle discrimination is an appropriate topic for employee attitude surveys, for company newsletters, for staff meeting," says Rowe. "An employer can encourage responsible networks of minorities and women to support each other in discussing such problems, to present noon-time workshops, to join mentoring programs, to learn how to deal effectively with discrimination, and how to report it when necessary. Supervisors can look for microinequities and discuss them in a low-key way as they happen."

Adds Young, "We will never get beyond where we are with the diversity discussion if we don't dig into this." —DI



PHILIPPE CHENG