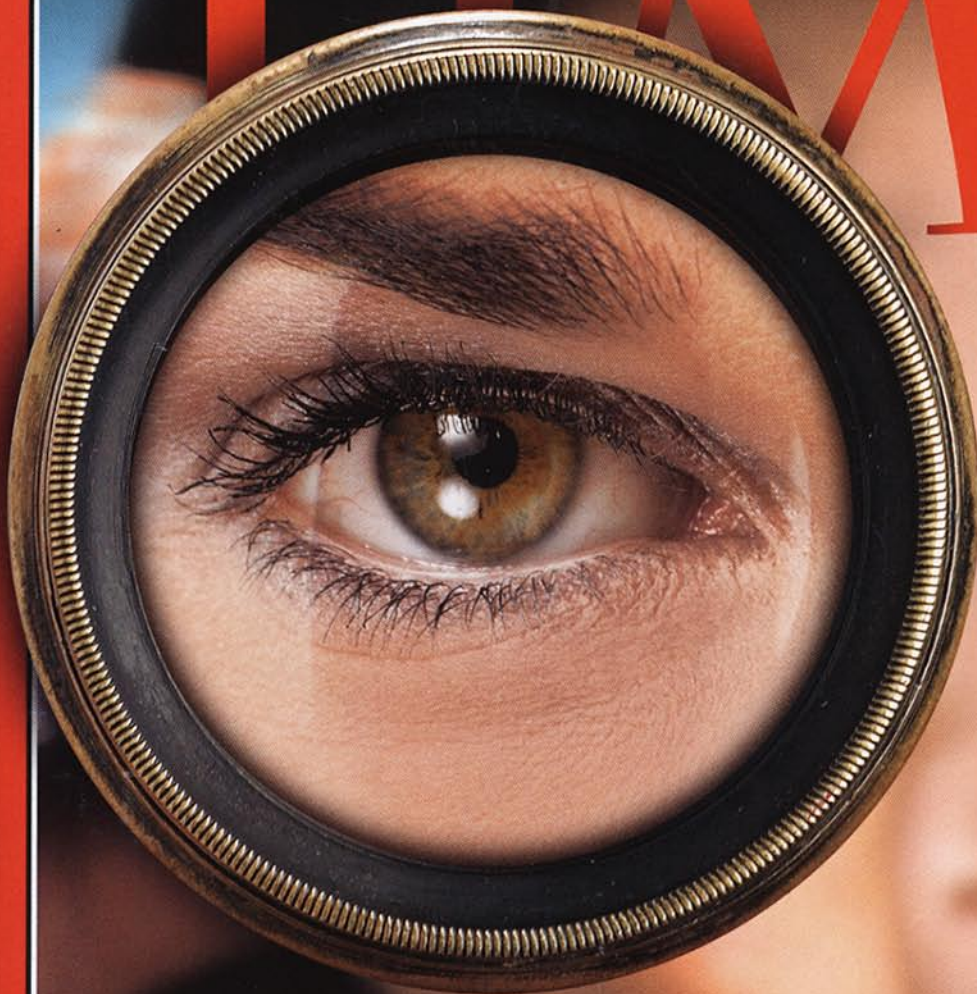


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# TIME



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# WHY YOUR BOSS MAY START SWEATING THE SMALL STUFF

New sensitivity training at the office focuses on all the little ways a tone-deaf manager can demoralize a staff

By **JULIE RAWE**

**E**VER HAD A BOSS TELL YOU TO KEEP talking while she checked her BlackBerry? How about a team leader who pronounces your name wrong? Such slights may not mean much individually, but added up they can lead—at least in terms of employee retention—to death by a thousand paper cuts.

As corporate America struggles to promote more women and minorities up the ladder, a new workplace buzzword is moving from executive suite to lowly cubicle. Part pop psychology, part human-resources jargon, the term *microinequities* puts a name on all the indirect offenses that can demoralize a talented employee. Equipped with this handy label, scores of companies, including IBM and Wells Fargo, are starting to hold training seminars that don't so much teach office etiquette as hold up a mirror showing how such minor, often nonverbal unpleasanties affect everyone.

This growing awareness is due largely to the efforts of globetrotting consultant Stephen Young, a former chief diversity officer at JPMorgan Chase who has addressed audiences as varied as rocket scientists at Raytheon and readers of *Seventeen* magazine on the power of small signals. "It's not so much what I say, but what you hear," he says. One of his most effective demonstrations—the one that has left even mighty CEOs stammering—has him role-playing a guy who is less and less interested in what a speaker is saying. "When you do this," Young says of the exercise, "you see performance change right on the spot."

His goal is to make even hardened executives recognize themselves—or, at the very least, their superiors—when he acts like the bigwig who keeps glancing at his watch during a meeting or cuts off a colleague mid-sentence to answer his cell phone. "It's not just mumbo-jumbo, feel-

good diversity training," says Gerald Lord, V.P. of finance and strategy for Campbell Soup's North American division. After sitting through one of Young's three-hour, Dr. Phil-style seminars last month, Lord is convinced that getting his fellow executives to

## Spotlight on Office Misbehavior

The insults can be subtle, and are shockingly common. And let's face it, some aren't so subtle

### ■ WHAT YOU'RE SAYING IS NOT THAT IMPORTANT

Checking your messages while a colleague is talking to you is the bad kind of multitasking. It devalues the speaker's time, and thus the speaker



### ■ HEY, WE'RE TIGHT, AND YOU'RE NOT

When execs greet each other with a playful punch, the polite handshake they give you can seem distant and even disapproving by comparison



### ■ WHY SHOULD I TAKE YOU OR YOUR IDEAS SERIOUSLY?

A manager dismisses the first idea pitched at a meeting by responding, "Great; thanks. So who'd like to get the ball rolling?"



pay attention to microgestures can help improve Campbell's bottom line.

Here's why: many of the companies that already spend big bucks to recruit and train talented employees are bracing for even stiffer competition as baby boomers start to retire amid a shortage of skilled labor. Teaching execs to be on the lookout for *microinequities*—a term that has bounced around academia since a professor at M.I.T. coined it in 1973—is a cheap way to hold on to hard-won recruits. After all, says Andrea Bernstein, diversity chair at the New York City-based white-shoe law firm Weil Gotshal, "you never know, when somebody leaves, if she would have been the next rainmaker." And no company wants even a single good idea to fall through the cracks because a manager has subconsciously written off the employee making the suggestion.

While some recent human-resources initiatives such as "work/life balance" or "wellness" may resonate more with, say, single moms or diabetics, eradicating these subtle slights has an almost universal appeal. Few bosses want to create tension between employees with something as simple as a handshake. But, Young says, when one worker is greeted with a polite how-do-you-do while the guy next door gets a playful pretend-punch, it's clear in an instant who is in the inner circle and who isn't. The same is true when a manager dismisses one person's idea and then embraces it when paraphrased by someone else.

It used to be that these tone-deaf moments were used to buttress discrimination claims. Now they are becoming the basis for those claims, according to Marko Mrkonich, managing director of Littler Mendelson, a San Francisco-based law firm that defends management in disputes with employees. "People are saying, 'I just feel really unwelcome,'" he says.

Of course, even enlightened head honchos know that being mindful of every little thing they do and say won't be easy, but then again, neither is competing in a tight labor market. Says Robert MacGregor, management-development chief at IBM, which recently partnered with Young to start training its 330,000 workers around the globe: "We want to create an environment that's open and inviting to all employees." And it's not just the words he's using but the earnest tone in his voice that show he means it. ■

ILLUSTRATIONS FOR TIME BY JONATHAN CARLSON