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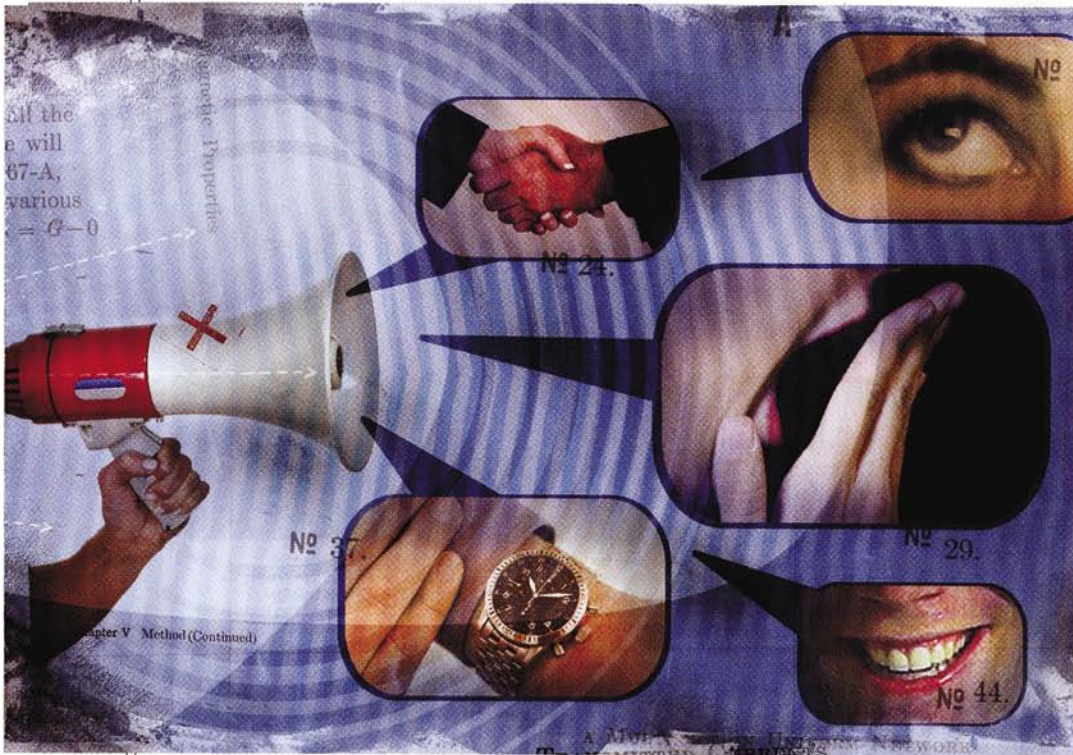
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Sweat the Small Stuff

Learning to decode and leverage “micromessages” can give you a leg up on the competition, says consultant Stephen Young.

BY GLORIA AVERBUCH

GROWING UP IN NEW YORK CITY, STEPHEN YOUNG LEARNED EARLY what it’s like to be both insider and outsider. At the elite Fieldston School, where he was one of only a handful of African-Americans, “I arrived by subway,” he says. “Many students came by limousine. When I went to other kids’ houses, I was treated like everyone else—until we arrived at a restaurant or country club. Then there were differences, but I couldn’t put my finger on them.”

After earning a communications degree from Emerson College, Young entered finance and eventually became senior vice president of JP Morgan Chase, managing the firm’s global diversity strategy. Inspired by MIT Professor Mary P. Rowe’s 1990 research into what she called “microinequities” in colleges and the workplace, he became a consultant and developed seminars to sensitize executives to the full range of what he calls “micromessages.” Young’s company, Insight Education Systems, founded in 2002, has helped implement his program at Starbucks, Raytheon, Cisco, IBM, Merck, and other Fortune 500 corporations. At his home in Montclair, Young, 54, spoke about his new book, *Micromessaging: Why Great Leadership is Beyond Words* (McGraw-Hill).

What are micromessages?

They are subtle cues communicated by tone of voice, choice of words, facial expression, hand gestures, body language, eye contact. Micromessages reveal what is behind our masks—intent plays a relatively minor role. They can be categorized as microinequities, microadvantages or neutral. In business, microadvantages are small signals that can inspire confidence and enable a person to stretch for higher goals.

How do you detect a microinequity?

You walk away from a conversation or meeting feeling uncomfortable or marginalized, but you're not sure why, because on the surface the words seemed normal. In a business introduction, say the executive just flicks his thumb toward the person being introduced and says, "This is our business manager." He's done nothing wrong; but consider the difference if he turns toward the person, smiles, and says, "This is Adam. He's the creative juice behind those exciting programs we developed."

What if the person isn't so stellar?

Don't be phony. As a leader, conveying microadvantages is not about "being nice" but about giving each person the same quality tools, the same respect and encouragement. On the receiving end, you can't determine if a message is a microinequity or a microadvantage in a vacuum. A playful punch on the arm can mean you're squarely in the inner circle, while politeness may place you on the fringe. Compare the micromessages you get to what others in your circle are receiving before you react.

You point out that people prefer to work with people like themselves. How can a boss get past that? It's hard to see through a new lens. So ask yourself, "How would I evaluate this work if my top person handed it in?"

Do microinequities mainly affect minorities and women?

While some groups do receive a disproportionate number of microinequities

in the workplace, every group gets them. Being on the wrong side of the merger, having a different style of dress, your age, your height—any of these can put you on the receiving end of microinequities, and the cumulative effect is discouraging and affects all aspects of a person's work.

What should you do if you think you're receiving microinequities?

I think it is worthwhile to try to engage the person. When my daughter's friend had a poor relationship with her teacher, I encouraged her to visit the teacher during lunch and start a conversation—asking the teacher about herself. In that conversation, the student employed microadvantages, and it worked in her favor. Her experience vastly improved, and the teacher's attitude in the classroom changed.

Don't you risk making a mountain out of a molehill?

People can overreact and see every tiny non-positive action as a microinequity, but most people recognize the difference between a minor slight and an accumulation of messages that affect your job commitment, loyalty or participation. Basic psychology tells us that, when we try to sweep anger and hurt under the carpet, it will manifest itself in some other way.

What is the lesson for management?

Generally, people don't leave companies, they leave bosses. They want respect, power, control—things that make them feel valued. People will perform well depending on the micromessages they get. So be cognizant of what you do when you interact with others.

Do you get micromessages at home?

Well, I've learned to interpret the hidden and not so hidden meanings in my wife's language. When we get ready to go out, for example, she will sweetly ask, "Are you wearing that?" Now, those four words may sound like a question, but that is no question. Not even close. What she's saying is, "Change the clothes!" ■

Gloria Averbuch, the author of 11 books on sports, health, and fitness, lives in Montclair.