

SMALL

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coaching

Body language

Manage the micromessages
you send to others

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for SBT

No matter what kind of coaching I'm doing, there is always focus on communication. Or, more specifically, those conversations we engage in that can make or break relationships.

Sometimes we focus on the verbal part of communication. We might work on speaking the truth, finding the appropriate words to get the outcome desired, handling the emotional content — things like that. In this area, one resource I often recommend is Susan Scott's *"Fierce Conversations."*

The most powerful elements in our conversations, though, are not words. The 2,000 to 4,000 subtle nonverbal signals we send and receive every day make our true opinions clear. Stephen Young, president of Insight Education Systems in New Jersey, calls these signals "micromessages" and even classifies them into microadvantages (positive) or microinequities (negative).

Microadvantages leave us feeling praised, supported, even adored. Microinequities leave us feeling insulted, ignored or even invisible.

These micromessages are part of nearly every interaction we have. They are often delivered in an unconscious way — yet they powerfully affect the result of the conversations.

We believe the micromessages more than the words we hear.

Young offers up these examples of microinequities: The boss who reads e-mails while you're talking with him; anyone who stays on the cell phone with no explanation, ignoring your

physical presence; the person who doesn't look at you while either one of you is speaking; the meeting chair who nudges the elbow of the buddy sitting next to him; and of course the eye-roll. There are a lot of eye signals people use to convey, "I don't believe a word of that — you're either lying or really stupid!" There are thousands of these microinequities, but you get the idea. You leave these encounters feeling diminished.

When we perceive the signals as microadvantages, just the opposite occurs. We feel truly listened to, even bathed in attention. Eye contact is plentiful and those eyes express openness to our opinions, our story. We feel seen, noticed, heard and respected.

As I mentioned earlier, we often are unaware of the signals we send. They do, however, sneak out all over the place.

Stephen Young proposes that many of these microsignals are small indications of our preconceived notions — about race, gender, ethnicity, status, age, etc. I remember when my Mom was in her late 70s and I'd accompany her to pick up prescriptions. The pharmacist would start explaining the drugs to me as if she were not even there. My Mom was short, but really long on intelligence, and a nurse besides. The pharmacist's behavior was a microinequity to her and based on the pharmacist's assumption, no doubt, that old people are all demented and/or irresponsible.

If employees are perceived to be dull, they are expected to perform poorly, and those expectations slip into how they're treated. The worst part is that we all have this tendency to live up to others' expectations. So you see what a crazy circle can be generated from preconceived ideas about any individual or group. Stephen Young's point is that we're only fooling ourselves if we think that if we cloak our true feelings in the "right" words, no one will know.

Experience tells us that even a 2-year-old knows if you have a notion that children are a pain to be tolerated at best. Every school kid knows how her teacher really feels about kids. Every parent knows, after a parent-teacher conference, how a teacher feels about his or her child. Don't you think? So why wouldn't your direct reports, your colleagues, your boss know your true feelings about them?

If you're in a position of leadership, you have enormous power to change the work environment by using microadvantages. First though, seriously consider any preconceived notions you might be lugging around. They keep your creativity and your communication skills in hock.

If you can do some housecleaning with those notions, and the expectations that go lock-step with them, you're ready to change the signals you're sending out.

You can start giving attention more fully, not interrupting, and making sure everyone's voice is invited into the discussion during meetings. You can "spread the wealth" of alliance with you by having lunch with different people and by adding a lot of variety to who you sit with at meetings. You can notice and comment on extraordinary performances of any kind and encourage professional growth. You can listen, which has the same letters as "silent."

If all of this is still a mystery to you, you can arrange to have yourself videotaped while in several different types of interactions. Then sit in a quiet room and really observe your own microbehaviors on the video. Think about any connections to preconceived notions. All of this can lead to releasing your own spirit, much more free of limitations.

You can also watch fear melt away in your organization — and that is really fun.



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