

MicroDeceptions & The Halo Effect



The Halo Effect obscures truth

“MicroDeceptions mean that as a leader, you never know when you’re hearing the truth.”

In the world of diversity and inclusion there is the *good*, the *bad* and the *invisible*. More often, the good and the bad are easily observable and managed. The invisible behaviors tend to not present themselves in such clear and tangible form. Exposure to these, like invisible radiation, can be exceptionally damaging. They often go undetected doing harm with no knowledge of how the damage occurred.

In a strange twist to the D&I formula which normally focuses on behaviors perpetrated upon others, in this case, these are behaviors where we unwittingly become both predator and prey. The messages are often well intended but can belie a harmful and disrespectful undercurrent. Learning how to swim above and around this powerful undertow can profoundly influence one’s leadership success.

Over the years, our flagship program, MicroInequities: Managing Unconscious Bias has given people the skills and tools to actively identify MicroInequities and Micro-Advantages in the workplace. Here, we will take a slightly different turn and look at a third category of micromessaging that sits quietly at ‘invisible central’— Micro-Deceptions.

While most D&I training focuses on awareness and the impact exclusion has on the disenfranchised, the focus of this article is entirely about the pernicious messages sent by subordinates to their superiors that limit and encumber the performance of both parties.

One doesn’t typically think of the boss as a victim of diversity and inclusion. Yet, as it relates to **MicroDeceptions**, these can be quite powerful and ubiquitous, even at the C-Suite level.

I recall presenting our program to the EVP and his senior management team at a large multinational company. During the break, he asked, “Steve, do you think I ever get any MicroInequities at my level?” My response was a resounding, “No. At your level people don’t typically receive MicroInequities. It’s more likely you receive **MicroDeceptions**.”

I could see the wheels spinning and the expression on his face said it all. He could sense where this was going and all his antennae had tuned to full alert. He reeled back asking, “What *exactly* are MicroDeceptions and why would I be getting them?”

Speaking directly to his concern, I said that MicroDeceptions mean “You never know when you’re hearing the truth.”

In your role, as the center of power, when people communicate with you or respond to your comments, or just listen to you speak, much of what they send back are messages their responses are often filtered through *caution* and not necessarily truth. This brought him to a full stop.

It is not necessarily done with malicious intent.

The phenomenon occurs for one of two reasons;

- Self-preservation (job security)
- Blind admiration (white-coat syndrome)

People are cautious to offend those who control their destiny and job security. *Don’t poke the bear*. Or, they are influenced by the stature and assumed wisdom bestowed upon the boss’ position of high esteem. This is sometimes known as the “Halo Effect.”

It’s no secret that people are hesitant to disagree with or challenge the boss. It is safer to stroke their ego and preserve one’s job security. This is particularly complex and layered when D&I differences are factored in.

The “Halo Effect” operates in the realm of the invisible. It’s a common aphorism that people laugh at the boss’ joke—even when it’s not funny. I’m sure everyone has sat in a meeting where the boss said something intended to be humorous and the entire conference room cackles, as if he or she were headlining at Caroline’s Comedy Club in Times Square.

On the other hand, if someone else were to utter the very same remark, it would be likely received with a sigh, roll their eyes and head shake of dismissal. Funny thing—under the Halo Effect, people actually deceive *themselves* into genuinely believing that the boss’ joke was the height of humor.

It suddenly became clear to that EVP that he was likely not hearing the truth. People do calculate gaining favor or potentially see him as the 'great oracle of wisdom' that has all the answers. Bottom line, undetected, MicroDeceptions block truth and performance. The more critical outcome of this behavior is that he is likely not getting his team's best thinking, perspectives, insights and contributions.

"But wait a minute," he responded defensively. "I always ask my people to tell me what they really think. Isn't that enough?"

That question became the impetus for a two-hour executive coaching session following the meeting. Here is a highlight;

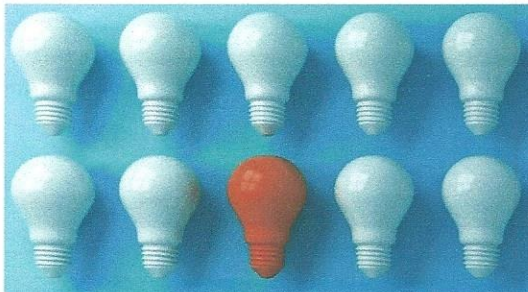
Asking people to *tell you* what they think is well-intended but weak in outcome. The flaw is, merely inviting challenge doesn't offer the safe haven to do so.

Don't just invite people to challenge your perspective, make it a requirement.

I shared with him a technique I first exercised early in my career when I was a middle manager on Wall Street. I kicked off one my staff meetings saying, "There are ten of us on this team, nine of you and one me. Since we already have my opinion, to the extent you agree with me lessens your value to the team. If your perspective always agrees with mine, then we don't need you except to complete busy work and tasks."

I explained, "You were hired for your thinking capacity. I expect to tap into that and have you bringing different perspectives and viewpoints to everything we do. It doesn't mean that I will always agree with and accept those perspectives—but I do require them from you."

To ensure that my comments



would go from 'request' to a 'requirement,' I informed the team that their performance appraisals, as well as my endorsement for future opportunities would hinge largely on demonstrating this practice of innovative thinking as a cornerstone to making our team more effective. "

A secondary and equally critical step for leaders is to never be defensive or dismissive to any challenge offered. It is essential that you explore perspectives thoroughly and express appreciation.

This process resonated deeply for that EVP. He was quite forthcoming in acknowledging that he had always been more comfortable with compliance and confirmation of his thinking than the vulnerability to his image of not having the answers.

Several months later he reached out to me. He confessed that although these

concepts and skills had not been in his comfort zone, he did see their value. Most importantly, when he applied them he saw a clear and measurable difference in the ways his team operated. The skills and techniques for managing this became a fundamental part of how he and other managers have virtually extinguished the ill-effects of

MicroDeceptions within their workplace culture.

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