

Micro-Inequities And How To Avoid Them

A micro-inequity, sometimes also called a micro-insult or micro-aggression, is a quick, small act that results in a slight or an indignity. A micro-inequity can be a remark or even a glance or tone of voice. It may be intentional, but many times it is not. Even when such acts are unintentional, however, they reveal a negative or erroneous assumption by the member of the one-up group about the one-down group.

Because such acts are small and often subtle, they are hard to talk about or correct. The common excuse offered for micro-inequities is that they are insignificant, and “We don’t want to be walking on eggshells around here.” A person who commits a micro-inequity might go on the defensive saying, “Can’t we tell a joke anymore? Everyone’s so serious!” Yet the effect of micro-inequities is real – they create irritation, frustration, and anger. When they happen over and over again, they accumulate and develop a weight of their own. Some people liken it to bleeding to death because of a thousand tiny paper cuts. Micro-inequities can make talented and capable employees question whether they can do their best or be successful in such an environment and may contribute to a desire to leave the organization.

Tips for Practicing This Culturally Effective Habit: Avoid Micro-Inequities

- 1. Think before you speak, especially when you are telling a joke.** Is it at someone else’s expense? Things that we used to think were funny, were only funny because no one at the table represented the group we were putting down. Thanks to the work of increased diversity, chances are that there are different individuals at the table now with different sensibilities and sensitivities.
- 2. Understand the difference between intent and impact.** The hardest thing to appreciate fully is how often micro-inequities happen, whether consciously or unconsciously, and how exhausting it is for people who have to deal with them. If you can spend a little time considering how needling and frustrating it is to hear

these slights repeatedly from different people, you may work harder to develop a more multi-dimensional understanding of individuals who are from groups different from your own.

3. Sometimes the people who are guilty of micro-inequities are well meaning and might even think of themselves as cool, for example, people who decide to use certain slang expressions only with and always with individuals from a one-down group because they think by using the vernacular, they are bonding with the individuals in the group. Really they are offending them. **Challenge them – and yourself – to really be cool by communicating that you want to know when you are using the wrong language or making it uncomfortable for people of difference to be around you.** Make it clear that if you are corrected, you won't hold it against the person you insulted and you won't insist on talking only about your intent while refusing to appreciate the impact of your actions.

4. **Pay attention to a person's reaction when you make a comment.** If you feel the tenor of the conversation change or the individual withdraw from the conversation, just ask the person if you said something that was wrong or offensive. Often that person will reply half heartedly that everything is okay; they may be more forthcoming if you say something like "I'm really trying to figure out when I am putting my foot in my mouth so that I can stop doing it. If you could help me, I would appreciate it."

5. **Organizations and individuals can start using the term micro-inequities and teaching people what they are.** A very prominent corporate trainer, Steven Young, has a great interactive training on micro-messaging that helps people to explore the subject. When people have the vocabulary and engage in dialogue about micro-inequities they can start pointing out these subtle but impactful actions and changing these behaviors in themselves and others when they see them.