



Harness the Power of Micromessaging

Susan couldn't quite put her finger on it, but she felt as though things were not going well with her new boss. When she came into his office to speak to him about an important issue, he would keep typing and look up at her only briefly. "Go ahead, I'm listening," he'd say. In staff meetings, it seemed like he paid a little more attention to everyone else than to her. When it was her turn to speak, he would rarely make eye contact, and would sometimes glance down at papers in front of him. "That's a good idea, Susan," he would say in a distracted, insincere voice before moving on to the next person. But when one of her colleagues had an idea, he would respond with enthusiasm, smiling and nodding his head at them and asking questions about the idea. She wished she could ask her boss why he seemed to treat her differently than the rest of the team, but she just couldn't—it would be silly. What would she say? "Uh, excuse me, I notice that you look away when I'm speaking but you don't look away when Charlie is talking to you..." That would never fly. He would think she was too sensitive and prone to imagining things. It would probably just make things worse if she brought it up.

After a while, Susan began to avoid his office and keep her ideas to herself. She started using email more frequently when she needed to talk to her boss, and when she had an idea for improving the quality of her team's work, she mentally shoved it under the carpet and went on with whatever she was doing.

"Micromessages" is a term coined by Dr. Mary Rowe of MIT to describe small, subtle, semi-conscious messages we send and receive when we interact with others that have a powerful impact. Dr. Rowe first used the term in the course of studying various negative impacts on students of color. To describe a pattern of ongoing, negative micromessages she used the term *microinequities*; to describe a pattern of positive, valuing messages, she called them *microadvantages*.

An understanding of these concepts is critical to creating a high performance team. Dr. Rowe's intent was to surface micromessages; to bring them up to the level of conscious awareness so that we can talk about them without feeling silly, or overly sensitive. She wanted to make them "discussable" so that we can acknowledge their very real impact on performance. I'm sure I don't need to tell you the end of Susan's story: she moved on. Maybe it was because her performance began to slip

and she was let go, or maybe she simply found a new job and left voluntarily before it got to that point. Either way, her story represents wasted talent.

Usually when we send our work groups out for training in how to communicate better with each other, that training will include a component of understanding non-verbal behavior. But the concept of micromessages goes beyond mere non-verbal behavior. Micromessages are composed not only of body language, gestures and facial expressions, but also of tone of voice, word choice, and our perception of what was *not* said as well as what was said. Very often we are completely unaware of the micromessages we send when we interact with someone, and very often they are influenced by our hidden biases or our feeling that someone is different in some way, and we simply are not comfortable with that. Here's a detail I left out of Susan's story: she is the only female on her team. All of her teammates, as well as her boss, are male. Does that shed some different light on the story?

It's not hard to imagine that Susan was probably right to think she couldn't have a frank discussion with her boss about how she felt. It's very likely that he is not aware of the negative micromessages he's sending to her, and might indeed feel that she was being overly sensitive if she tried to discuss it. So what's the answer? How do we make micromessages "discussable"?

Dr. Rowe has taken the first step for us by naming and describing micromessages. The next step is to educate your work groups about them. Put your entire team in a room to explore the powerful impact of micromessages on performance and you'll be guaranteed of at least one thing. The next time one of your employees feels like something isn't quite right, he or she will know how to address it with the team—in some way other than by withholding ideas, withdrawing from the group, and eventually finding a new job.