Micro-affirmations & Micro-inequities

In 1973 I took a job at MIT, working for the then new President and Chancellor. I was charged, among other things, with learning how the workplace could improve with respect to people who were under-represented at MIT—as examples, men and women of color, white women, and people with disabilities.

Major Issues As an economist I had expected to learn about big issues standing in the way of progress. Working together with others, I did find some. For example we looked at the pension plan, a plan that paid benefits unequally for men and women with the same record of service. (Senior officers at MIT equalized the plan in a way that benefited both women and men). I helped a working group to design Serious Search recruitment procedures, procedures that turned out to help people of color—and, of course, also Caucasians. We looked at supports for dependent care that were needed by women—which of course illuminated the fact that men also needed support for dependent care. We helped with campus maps, and ramps, and lifts for those who needed them, and learned of course that they helped everyone. I learned what everyone now knows—that equitable work structures usually help everyone.

Little Issues In addition I noticed the importance of "little issues." Little acts of disrespect, and failures in performance feedback, seemed to corrode some professional relationships like bits of sand and ice. "Little issues" included names mistakenly left off a list, people who were not introduced at meetings, (or mistakenly introduced as

someone else of the same race).

I learned of inequitable job assignments, failures to provide schedules or food or space that were needed by a particular group, invitations that were uncomfortable for gays, or women, or non-Christians ("Please feel free to bring your wife;" "There will be a belly-dancer at the party;" "Please join us to celebrate Christmas"). There were ugly cartoons that attacked certain groups, and jokes that made fun of different cultures or of disabilities. Sometimes I would hear a presumption that someone of a certain gender or race or religion could do some task better—which then often led to selective perceptions favoring an already favored group.

Micro-inequities In 1973 I began writing about "micro-inequities." I defined them as ***"apparently small events which are often ephemeral and hard-to-prove, events which are covert, often unintentional, frequently unrecognized by the perpetrator, which occur wherever people are perceived to be 'different.'"***

I observed what I saw as the cumulative, corrosive effect of many inequities, and concluded that micro-inequities have been a principal scaffolding for discrimination in the US. Micro-inequities appeared to be a serious problem since much of this bias is unconscious and unrecognized—and even hard to believe when described—unless videotaped.

I found other authors who had looked at micro-messages, including Jean-Paul Sartre with respect to anti-Semitism and Chester Pierce, MD, with respect to racism. And I found, and continue to find, a huge literature on selective perception, in-groups and out-groups, Pygmalion studies, mirror neurons, how we communicate emotionally, and the like—which I will not attempt to summarize here.

Mainly I just pondered, from the point of view of a practitioner, why if at all would little things make a difference? I published a number of hypotheses as to why micro-inequities may be a problem.

In addition, I wondered, if micro-inequities really *are* a problem, how did under-represented people ever succeed? Of course the truly important point is that minorities succeed and have succeeded by dint of great talent, by strength of character, brilliant innovations and very hard work.

In addition, in the 1970's I learned something that now is considered commonplace: the power of person-to-person (one-on-one) recruitment, of mentoring, and of networks, to bring minorities and women into traditionally white male organizations, and to help them succeed. But, I wondered, how did these practices actually work?

I observed many hundreds of our top faculty and managers as they recruited effectively, and mentored brilliantly, and established cohesive and supportive networks with each other and their mentees. And I watched how some effective supervisors recruited and mentored under-represented people, and lent support to networks of women and people of color.

A dozen times I watched a department head get to know networks of people of color and then successfully recruit outstanding men and women who had been thought "not to exist." (Once a particularly charming, handsome and gallant department head happily introduced himself to every woman at a scientific conference, saying that he had been "instructed by our ombudsman to get to know all the women.")

Micro-affirmations How *do* effective mentoring practices work? They seem to me to work by ***micro-affirmations— apparently small acts, which are often ephemeral and hard-to-see, events that are public and private, often unconscious but very effective, which occur wherever people wish to help others to succeed***.

Micro-affirmations are tiny acts of opening doors to opportunity, gestures of inclusion and caring, and graceful acts of listening. Micro-affirmations lie in the practice of generosity, in consistently giving credit to others—in providing comfort and support when others are in distress, when there has been a failure at the bench, or an idea that did not work out, or a public attack. Micro-affirmations include the myriad details of fair, specific, timely, consistent and clear feedback that help a person build on strength and correct weakness.

I have come to believe that teaching and training about micro-affirmations may help an organization in several different ways:

The first effect is obvious—appropriately affirming the work of another person is likely both to help that person do well, and to help him or her to enjoy doing well.

The second effect is that consistent, appropriate affirmation of others can spread from one person to another—potentially raising morale and productivity. It helps everyone, men and women, people of color and Caucasians. It appears to be particularly helpful for department heads, and anyone who is senior to another person, to "model" affirming behavior.

The third effect is subtle, and deals with the point that it may be hard for a person to "catch" himself or herself unconsciously behaving inequitably. I may not always be able to "catch myself" behaving in a way that I do not wish to behave. But if I try always to affirm others in an appropriate and consistent way, I have a good chance of *blocking* behavior of mine that I want to prevent. Many micro-inequities are not conscious—but affirming others can become a conscious as well as unconscious practice that *prevents* unconscious slights. This effect is the subject of the rest of this essay.

Implications for Action How might all this be useful to all of us and especially to managers? Let me offer some thoughts.

• Managers can and should pay attention to "small things."

• The principles of appreciative inquiry are relevant to micro-affirmations: "leading" rather than "pushing;" building on strength and success, rather than first identifying faults and weakness.

• Small things are especially important with respect to feelings. (Managers must be impartial about *facts* but it is often appropriate and helpful to affirm peoples' *feelings*.) As it happens, it is relatively easy for most people to practice and teach how to affirm feelings. This is important because the "mechanics" of affirmation are not trivial in human affairs—*attitudes may follow behavior just as behavior may follow attitudes.*

• Whenever a question is brought to us about how to change offensive behavior—our own behavior or that of another—we can teach the principles of changing behavior, and explore options about how to do it.

Changing Behavior People often ask how they can change their own behavior or help someone else to do so. This list suggests some ideas. These suggestions are in descending order of probable effectiveness. Alas, the least effective option, at the bottom of the list, occurs very commonly in organizations.

Option One. Reinforce and reward good behavior that, as it takes place, is *inconsistent with, and blocks*, *the (bad) behavior that you hope will disappear*.... It is likely to be important to consider intangible rewards as well as tangible rewards for "doing things right." This is the most effective option.

Option Two. Reinforce good behavior; commend and reward actions that are helpful, commend good performance and the correction of errors. It is likely to be important to consider intangible rewards as well as tangible rewards for "doing things right."

Option Three. Punish bad behavior, with appropriate tangible and intangible sanctions.

Option Four. "Name" what is good behavior and bad behavior.

Option Five. Ignore bad behavior (and good behavior).

Option Six. Reward bad behavior.

Option Seven. Alternately reward and punish bad behavior—this could cast it in concrete forever. *This is the least effective option.*

Some Examples Imagine that a unit head, Dr. Lee, asks for "advice" because he or she is seen to be abrasive and rude. It seems that Lee is given to tirades, harsh words and cutting criticisms. Lee's "bullying" is reported by certain under-represented groups to be especially uncomfortable; members of those groups simply do not thrive near Lee.

How did Dr. Lee get this way? It may be that Lee has been promoted and given raises because of pushing others fiercely to perform (see option six above). Or—worse yet—Lee has been commended for performance *and* also scolded for abrasiveness—but then promoted again—so Lee ignores the scolding (option seven). Or many people around Lee ignore Lee's temper (option five). Lee is not likely to change.

Can we help Lee? Suppose that Dr. Lee acquires a new supervisor or a courageous friend who "names" Lee's bad temper, in a friendly and professional way, and suggests to Lee that Lee might stop the tirades (option four). Or a new supervisor writes a disciplinary letter to Lee for interpersonal abuse (option three). It is possible that Lee will notice.

Can we be more effective? Now imagine that new supervisors and colleagues and friends commend Lee for giving up the tirades (option two). This may help. It might help even more if Lee learns active listening and the habits of supportive feedback (option one).

Suppose that Dr. Lee agrees with you to try an experiment. He or she will attempt not to speak until spoken to—and then will affirm what the other person has said —before launching into an instruction or request or a criticism. Lee agrees to practice this behavior, whether the topic is mundane small-talk, or work-related.

"Good morning, Dr. Lee."
"Chris, hello, it is a good morning — I am happy that it has stopped snowing."

Chris continues, "Might you help me with this problem, Dr. Lee?"
"Chris, I would be glad to sit down with you about this. And when we finish, could we also discuss the next project?"

Will this be difficult for Dr. Lee? Lee has agreed to practice raising concerns constructively, and to respond to questions effectively. How might Lee actually do this? Here is an idea that sometimes helps.

The supervisor first asks Lee to think of someone that he or she most reveres and respects, or someone with whom Lee is always mindful of his or her conduct. (Even very abrasive people are usually able to think of someone: a grandparent, a religious leader, the spouse of the CEO, or a former teacher.) Lee then imagines that this deeply respected person is listening to every conversation—and practices accordingly.

Of course this simple plan will not always work or be appropriate, and the situation might be beyond the reach of a good new habit. But we may be able to apply the principles in many situations.

Often Option One takes the form of a generic plan of action. If department heads are failing to search for under-represented candidates for a job, or do not "see" them, the generic plan might be that department heads engage in one-on-one recruitment. (When any organization wants to hire a particular top performer, or attract a particular customer or donor, department heads are likely to "recruit" that individual

in person.)

If an organization wants to become more diverse, one-on-one recruitment is likely to be much more effective than advertisements. Moreover, a department head who reaches out in person, and feels affirmed by actually hiring a desirable candidate, may become an effective mentor.

As another example, if people of color and white women are "invisible" in the organization, then Option One might be to institute career development planning for everyone, with training for all cohorts in what is expected—and with rewards for supervisors whose supervisees give them the highest 360 evaluations for this skill.

The idea of affirming (good) behavior that blocks the (unwanted) behavior one wants to change can of course be extended into any arena. If I have gained a few pounds and wish to become more fit, I can try exercising at the time I might otherwise eat. I tell myself that endorphins—and the improved fitness—will serve as micro-affirmations. ☺