

## Subtleties Matter: The Next Generation of Diversity Education and Training

While many organizations have instituted diversity training, it often has limited effectiveness in changing the subtle, underlying behaviors necessary for a diverse and inclusive workplace. On June 6, 2005 at the City Bar's second annual diversity conference, Stephen Young, former Senior Vice President of Corporate Diversity for JPMorgan Chase & Co. and founder of Insight Education Systems, led an interactive session to generate awareness of the micro-messages people send daily in the workplace that contribute to an atmosphere of inclusion or exclusion for certain groups.

### The Power of Micro-Messages

Each individual micro-message may only have a small positive or negative impact. However, the cumulative effect of micro-advantages can lead to profound feelings of inclusion and the perception of opportunities of advancement and development within the organization. The reverse is true for those experiencing the accumulated effect of micro-inequities. Ultimately, micro-messages can impact the retention, development and advancement of talented attorneys.

While not solely a diversity issue, bias can manifest itself subtly and subconsciously as micro-inequities. For example, women and racial/ethnic minorities sometimes describe situations where their ideas are discounted in a meeting only to be presented later by a male colleague and embraced by the team. Another common example is feeling excluded from informal social gatherings for lunch or after-work.

### Addressing Micro-Inequities:

Awareness of micro-inequities can result in meaningful behavior changes in the workplace. The only way to deal with the negatives messages is to raise awareness and promote candid dialogue. Often micro-messages are difficult to identify and even more challenging to broach with colleagues and superiors. Here are some suggested strategies:

#### Definitions

**Micro-messages:** Small, subtle messages, sometimes subconscious, that are communicated between people without saying a word. MIT researchers found that people send between 2,000 and 4,000 positive and negative micro-messages each day. These messages include looks, gestures, and tone of voice.

**Micro-advantages:** Positive, powerful micro-messages contribute to feeling valued and belonging. Ultimately, micro-advantages encourage employees to excel in their work and commit to their employer.

**Micro-inequities:** Negative micro-messages devalue, discourage and ultimately impair performance in the workplace. Positive micro-messages are transmitted more frequently than negative ones. Often the absence of a positive message is in essence a negative message.

Name the issue by educating attorneys about the subtle bias that stands in the way of an inclusive workforce and giving permission to individuals to raise the issue when it arises.

Convene discussion groups to discuss how micro-messages manifest themselves in your organization. This can be an effective way to identify common challenges.

Identify safe ways for individuals to broach the topic when micro-inequities occur, either as the receiver of the micro-message or a bystander, such as through role plays or sample scripts.

Designate an appropriate person to act as an advisor or an intermediary for individuals who perceive micro-inequities.

Monitor progress by periodically checking in with attorneys through focus groups, affinity groups, or surveys to assess whether subtle bias continues to inhibit an inclusive workplace.

Acknowledging subtle, unconscious bias has the potential to change the ways in which people communicate. Without knowledge of micro-inequities, legal employers may never realize that unspoken, unintentional behavior can have adverse effects on the work performance of others.

To learn more about micro-inequities in diversity efforts or for upcoming diversity sessions, please see our Website at [www.nycbar.org](http://www.nycbar.org) or contact Meredith Moore, Director of the NYC Bar's Office for Diversity at [mmoore@nycbar.org](mailto:mmoore@nycbar.org).