Why the Little Things Matter

Someone recently said to me that he didn't bother speaking up against stereotypes and demeaning jokes or comments, because these were "little things." That got me thinking about why the little things matter…

Microinequities — That’s the big term for these “little things” that many choose to ignore. The problem is that even small things — subtle slights, jokes, and stereotypes — don’t just disappear. They can affect the “victim,” building up over time and chipping away at self-esteem or reputation.

Researchers have found that seemingly small actions often can, and do, lead to more serious actions; the “little things” serve as stepping-stones to progressively more damaging actions.

An extreme example concerns Jews during the Holocaust. Genocide did not take place immediately but instead, followed years of increasingly negative words, images, stereotypical depictions, scapegoating and discrimination against Jews. According to Beth Yohe of the Anti-Defamation League, “You can’t get to the place where people are willing to carry out genocide without first setting the stage and convincing people that the victims are less than human.”

A more prevalent example takes place in the form of bullying. Bullying often starts with some form of name-calling, followed by exclusion and isolation. Pushing, threats of violence and ultimately physical violence may follow.

Thankfully, there are strategies to interrupt harmful comments and actions at the source so they don’t become more serious. One strategy involves recognizing and avoiding the high cost of silence.

In the face of damaging words and actions — small and large — many resort to silence. The result? Silence does nothing to stop the behaviors because silence is often interpreted as support by the aggressor and as lack of support by the victim. Silence actually fuels microinequities and allows them to evolve into bigger issues.

The good news? You are part of the solution. If you find that a comment is hurtful or demeaning towards another person, stand up, speak your mind and prevent a small injustice from becoming bigger. Offer words of support and affirmation. Act quickly and with respect. After all, it doesn’t take a lot of fuss to address something while it's still small. If you feel unable to speak up, seek an ally who can and will. Remember, your silence hurts.

Definitions

Microinequities — The 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.” [Source: Dr. Mary Rowe]

Microaffirmations — Subtle or apparently small acknowledgments of a person’s
value and accomplishments. [Source: Dr. Mary Rowe]

**Acts of Silence** — Choosing not to confront something because you believe doing so would be difficult, would not be rewarded, or may even be punished. [Source: Adapted from Dr. Leslie Perlow]

---

**Your Story**

Submitted by David Oakley

As a boy growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, I spent ample time on the lonely side of exclusion. I know the depths of despair to which one can descend when isolated, ridiculed and abused. I was called names, spat on, choked, kicked, beaten, and locked outside in the snow and freezing cold, abused on many levels, in many ways. People would cross the street to avoid having to pass near someone like me. These abuses and exclusions came with many faces of many ages, from other children to adults. Perhaps some of you have lived stories similar to my own.

I was very fortunate to have survived Polio at the age of two in 1949. Following Polio, my mobility was accomplished only by using a full body brace, two leg braces and wooden crutches.

Polio was the dreaded disease of its day, killing or disabling thousands. In 1955, Dr. Jonas Salk introduced to the world the vaccine that began the eradication of Polio. But Polio had a companion, infectious in nature, which was not eradicated by the Salk vaccine. We know that companion as ignorance. Ignorance is still pervasive today for a never-ending number of reasons — race, color, culture, religion, sexual orientation, etc. There is, sadly, enough ignorance to go around.

These events taught me an acute awareness of the feelings of others, of knowing, seeing and hearing that which many others do not. Many have been surprised by my voice or my presence at unexpected times. I have surprised bullies of physical dominance, as well as bullies who were more psychologically clever in their approach. I've seen the look of fear and aloneness on the face of an intended victim replaced by a strengthened look of unity with another, simply because I spoke up for that individual. It is the look of strength found by inclusion.

We are each the sum total of our own life’s experiences. It is what we do with those experiences that matters most. When we speak up, step up, reach out to others who are excluded, we may very well save someone from an experience that might otherwise leave scars for a lifetime.

Exclusion, setting one apart, can be one of the loneliest of all places to reside. My life experiences have taught me the true significance of inclusion for all. We must look beyond our differences in order to protect our similarities.

---

2/15/2011

© Leslie C. Aguilar, President, International Training and Development, LLC

Permission granted to post on Darden website