Small Acts Transform the World: Microaffirmations

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Small acts, when multiplied by millions of people, can transform the world.

- Howard Zinn
Small acts, when multiplied by hundreds of people can transform a school.
Strengths-Based Approaches to Bring Out the Best in People
OUR OBJECTIVE

You and your students, colleagues, team, partners, etc. ALL have strengths ("wings"). Our goal is to see and affirm our strengths and the strengths of others to enable flight.
Our Foundation

All people have strengths

All colleges, universities, organizations, and communities have strengths

These strengths can serve as the building blocks for positive development

- All individuals are naturally creative, resourceful, and whole.
- It is not our job to ”fix” people, but to bring out their naturally inherent strengths and help them grow.
The first step in bringing out strengths and helping them grow...

...is seeing and validating people through the small, daily interactions that occur every day.
It all starts with micromessaging.
Micromessaging

Verbal and nonverbal messages conveyed through tone of voice, word choice, and body language

Occur throughout the day and affect how people interact

40-100 micromessages occur between two people in a typical 10-minute conversation

Message can be positive and negative

Holder-Winfield, 2010; Rowe, 2008; Young, 2007
Microaggressions

- Brief and commonplace exchanges
- Intentional or unintentional
- Hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults
- Harmful or unpleasant psychological influence

(Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal & Esquilin, 2007)
Microaggressions

“You speak really good English for an immigrant.”

“Why haven’t you found a husband yet?”
Microaffirmations

Small acts, public and private, fostering:
Inclusion
Listening
Comfort
Support
especially for people who may feel unwelcome or invisible in an environment

(Rowe, 2008; Powell, Demetriou & Fisher, 2013)
Individual success is the product of thousands of small gestures extended on a daily basis by caring, supportive individuals throughout an organization who enact a talent development philosophy.
THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS ARE NOT "THINGS"
“There is a privileged seemingly universal assumption that everyone's parents went to college and many assume that it is the norm for post secondary college. This simply isn't the case... no one have ever offered me support around being a first generation. I also have small pangs of jealousy when students talk about how their family came to visit and their parents filled their car with gas, loaded their refrigerator and took them out for a lovely dinner. While I am genuinely happy for them, it is tough because my parent (one parent deceased) doesn't have any frame of reference about how strenuous and mentally exhausting and depressing life at [UNIVERSITY] can be.”
“Just this past week I wore my [first-generation college student organization] t-shirt and my work study boss noticed it and told me something along the lines of "hey nice t-shirt" in a genuine way. We were the only two people in the office at the time and I replied with a simple thanks. It was a very minor compliment to give me but it really did make me feel positive and brought up my thoughts around being proud of myself for being the first person in my family to attend college.”
I WANT TO THRIVE NOT JUST SURVIVE
Optimal growth or development; more than the absence of the negative; more than basic achievement

Relative balance; one is not considered thriving if he or she is functioning positively in one area but having serious developmental problems in others (i.e., flourishing socially but failing classes or straight As but no social connections)

What is thriving?

Engagement of one’s unique talents, interests, and/or aspirations; self-awareness of one’s uniquenesses, and the opportunities to purposefully manifest them; actively working towards fulfilling one’s potential

Contribution: positively affect people and situations around oneself
When do people thrive?

When they appreciate and act on their environment.
Appreciate
to understand (a situation) fully; recognize the full implications of

- I appreciate how the university works (tuition, financial aid, advising, faculty, peers, etc.).
- I appreciate the value of an undergraduate education.
- I understand that learning is challenging.
- I appreciate that failure is part of success.
Act

take action; do something

- I am prepared to act.
- I have the right information to inform my actions.
- I am motivated to act.
- I am supported to act.
- I believe that my actions matter.
- I am affirmed.
- My actions are validated.
Through micromessages we understand our environment and whether or not we feel empowered to act on the environment.
Microaffirmations, Hope & Trust
Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness

Desmond Tutu
Microaffirmations support hope
- Hope is more than a feeling, it is a cognitive process (Snyder, 2006)
- It is a way of thinking and processing information
- It can be learned
- It gives individuals power to change their outlook

Microaffirmations counteract hopelessness
- Hopelessness is dangerous; it leads to feelings of powerlessness
- Feeling powerless is detrimental to student success
• Trust is built in small moments (Gottman, 2011). Small, daily interactions.

• Trust builds commitment to higher education institution (Carvalho & de Oliveira Mota, 2010).
What can I do today?
Communicate **microaffirmations** on a daily basis

“*I’m glad you’re here.*”

“*Thank you for your email.*”

“*I know this is difficult news...*”

“*That is a good question.*”

“*I hear you.*”
MICROAFFIRMATIONS IN
TO YOUR DAILY ROUTINE

• Every time you open your email, before reading or firing off a new message, FIRST send one quick message acknowledging and affirming another

• Just a quick sentence of appreciation
When a student arrives for an appointment, instead of “How can I help you?” say “I’m glad to see you.”

Before jumping in to the content of an email to answer a question, write “Thank you for your email.”
Microaffirmations can be especially influential when communicated from a person with more social capital to a recipient with less.
If a student is not showing up for class or a staff member is not showing up to staff meetings, instead of communicating anger or disappointment, you can explain:

“When you are not there we miss out on what you could be contributing.”

This tells the individual that it is important that she shows up and that she is noticed.
Especially powerful when delivering constructive criticism, difficult news, or when a situation is challenging.

When discussing failure to meet academic expectations, admission to competitive programs, or distressing financial issues.

Acknowledging that the conversation is upsetting, “I see how concerned you are,” can help a student feel understood.

It’s not about being nice.
When someone comes to you with a problem stating, “Coming to me is a good first step” appreciates the action the individual has already taken and can lead to a productive discussion of next steps.

When someone is expressing feelings of discouragement, taking a moment to validate those feelings can be powerful.

Validating one’s feelings does not mean agreeing with the individual’s interpretation of the experience or the reaction to the experience. Rather, it makes clear to the individual that you appreciate how they are feeling and that you are actively listening.
Active Listening As Microaffirmation

- Lean forward when students are talking with you
- Make direct eye contact
- Repeat what students are saying to make sure you understand
- Follow up with questions that show your interest and can help students to draw their own conclusions
Hey You!
Did you know that
You Matter?

You absolutely do!
Please take a reminder...

You have influence.
You can do anything.
You are appreciated.
You are loved.
You are talented.
You are a Wildcat.
You make a difference.
You are amazing.
You matter.
You are valuable.

The University of Arizona
Student Success &
Retention Innovation
Share your stories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What People Think Success Looks Like:</th>
<th>What Success Really Looks Like:</th>
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[Diagram with arrows indicating a linear path on the left and a more complex, intertwined path on the right.]
The Iceberg Illusion

Success is an iceberg

WHAT PEOPLE SEE

SUCCESS!

WHAT PEOPLE DON'T SEE

- Dedication
- Hard work
- Discipline
- Disappointment
- Things I have to give up
- Fail
- Sacrifice
- Failure
- Persistence

@syvliaduckworth
1. What can you do in your current role to reflect on your micromessaging?

2. What can you do in your current role to communicate microaffirmations?
thank you!

Stay in touch
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