

# The positive power of 'micro-interactions'

*Assembly by Mr Jack Coward, Houseparent and Teacher of Music, March 2024*

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Good morning. Hi. How's it going? Hello.

You probably hear these greetings dozens of times every day. They might be the start of a conversation, or they might simply be a way of acknowledging someone as you pass them by. But do they matter?

In preparing this talk, I've been reflecting on the greetings that I use myself. It depends on the context, of course, but "Alright?!" or "Hey, you alright?" seem to be my go to phrases. They're not very formal or especially proper, but they seem to work.

Of course, when you consider what I am actually saying, things become a little more problematic. While this greeting could be interpreted literally as a concerned inquiry into your well-being, I'm really using the phrase as a way of saying "Hello" and it's unlikely that you'll respond with a detailed account of the prep that's worrying you or the challenging lesson you just had.

This greeting also doesn't translate especially well in other countries. When I worked in Australia, pupils responded to my greeting of "You alright?" with looks of confusion. "Why does that guy keep asking me if I am OK?"

Conversely, the standard Ozzie greeting of "How're you going" made little sense to me: How am I going to go where? Why does how I get there matter?! Similarly, my wife, who grew up in the USA but has lived here for years, has to stop herself "alrighting" people when she goes home - people in America interpret this as a serious question rather than a greeting in passing....but the classic American "What's up?" only has one response in my book....you've guessed it... "The sky!"

So whether you say "Hi, hello, or how are you"...I've come to the conclusion that what you say doesn't really matter. What's important is that some acknowledgment takes place. You can even greet people without saying anything at all ... with a smile, a nod, or a wave. What you're really saying is "I see you". We might not stop and talk, we might not even know each other, but we are both humans, going about our day - and this interaction, no matter how brief, really matters.

A smile is fairly universally accepted as a friendly and positive gesture - you really can't go too far wrong with a smile. Momentary eye contact works too, even if it's accompanied by some raised eyebrows to say "I'm in a bit of a hurry"...but I still acknowledge you.

Of course, greetings are still context dependent. I grew up in a town of a similar size to the city of Wells, where it was normal for strangers to greet each other with - at the very least - a smile or a nod.

Then I studied in London, where greeting all the strangers you pass is - of course - impossible. I've still got memories of travelling on the Underground and feeling overwhelmed by the impossible number of people to acknowledge - it simply can't be done.

The closest comparison I can draw in our own school context is walking past the dining hall queue at 5:15...you'd find it a little odd if I greeted everyone individually...but, thankfully, our school - with all the walking between buildings we have to do in the course of any day - provides numerous opportunities to acknowledge and greet people: and these micro-interactions are more important than you might think.

Last year, a study in the academic journal *Social, Psychological and Personality Science*, which used data from over 60,000 participants, found that greeting and thanking people, both strangers and acquaintances, led to greater life satisfaction. So, saying "Hello" can make both you, and the person you are greeting, feel happier. Think about that - the casual, in passing greetings which you make every day actually have a positive impact, both on you and on the people you meet - what an encouraging thought! Of course, none of us feel happy all of the time - and that's normal. While I would never encourage anyone to hide the way they are truly feeling - it's important to talk to someone if you're feeling down - isn't it empowering to know that, even if you're having a bad day, making the effort to interact with people can make you feel better.

This study adds to a growing body of evidence that acknowledging and greeting people is a powerful positive force. A report published last August, written by psychologists at the University of Sussex who were working with Transport for London, found that less than a quarter of passengers in London acknowledge the driver as they board a bus. As part of the study, signs encouraging passengers to acknowledge their driver were installed on 150 London buses. As a result, the number of passengers who greeted or thanked the driver increased significantly...and if this initiative were scaled up to the entire London bus network, it would equate to a staggering 140 million more interactions across the course of a year.

Bus drivers interviewed as part of the research said that passengers saying "good morning" or "thank you" had a positive impact on their happiness and job satisfaction. They said it made them feel "respected", "seen" and "appreciated".

One experienced driver told the researchers: "It seems like something small, but if a person, especially a young person, hops on my bus and says 'thanks driver' it can change my whole mood. It's like they're saying 'I see you. I appreciate you.'" The study concluded that micro-interactions like these are more well-received, and more meaningful, than most of us realise.

So, as you go about your day today, know that making an effort to look up, to smile, to catch someone's eye, and to offer a greeting of your choice isn't just good manners - it's actually scientifically proven to improve your mood. In a world where it's easy to focus on the negatives and to hurry from one challenge to the next, isn't it nice to know that something so simple and achievable can make such a difference, and that we can all have a positive impact if we just remember to say... "Hello."