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Her certifications include: MN Coalition Against Sexual Assault, Credentialed Advocate (Advanced Level) with designation of Comprehensive Victim Intervention Specialist; Volunteer Impact Leadership – MN Association of Volunteer Administrators; and Technology of Participation Facilitation Methods – The Institute of Cultural Affairs.

UNDERSTANDING UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

By Nancy Boyle | EAP Trainer

You sit down with your morning coffee to look over the candidates for project lead discussion. Kyle MBA and has been with the company for four years; Rashad MBA and has been with the company two years with previous project development experience; and Kendra MBA has been with the company five years and has been showing great promise as a leader within the organization.

You ask each of the candidates to come in one more time to share their vision and ideas about the project and how they would delegate responsibilities to the team. It is quite obvious that Kendra would be an ideal fit, but then you remember that she is a single mom. "Would this project be too much to add to her already busy life?" you wonder.

Where did this assumption come from? Why did the thought cross your mind only about Kendra? After all, Kyle and Rashad are both fathers with busy lives.

We each are biased in some way. Sometimes we realize it, sometimes we don't, but we are often making decisions based on these biases.

95% OF WHAT WE TELL YOU IS TRUE WE HAVE NEVER SEEN. WE THINK IT'S TRUE BASED ON THE **5%** WE HAVE SEEN.

— HAROLD MEYERS

Organizational leaders need to be aware of *unconscious bias*, also known as *implicit bias*. Unconscious bias refers to the attitudes and

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stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner.

One of the most prominent areas of life where bias can play out is in the workplace. It can factor in co-worker relationships, disciplinary practices, hiring practices, and more.

Who is most likely to be a CEO or leadership role? According to a study from Malcom Gladwell-Blink, 30% of Fortune 500 CEOs are 6 foot and taller. In the United States, only 4% of all men are 6 foot 2 or taller, resulting in 90% of CEOs being above average height. Is the assumption or bias that taller males have more leadership ability?

White American males constitute 33% of the U.S. population. They make up:

- 80% of tenured positions in higher education
- 80% of the U.S. House of Representatives
- 80% to 85% of U.S. Senate
- 92% of Forbes 400 executive CEO-level positions

Out of Fortune 500 CEOs, 13 are women and four are African Americans.

BECOMING AWARE of your unconscious bias is imperative in our decision-making process in a number of different ways:

- **Our Perception:** How we see people and perceive reality.
- **Our Attitude:** How we react towards certain people.
- **Our Behaviors:** How receptive/friendly we are towards certain people.
- **Our Micro-affirmations:** How much or how little we comfort certain people in certain situations.
- **Our Attention:** Which aspects of a person we pay the most attention to.
- **Our Listening Skills:** How much we actively listen to what certain people say.

These things will affect who we interview, how we interview, and who we decide to hire. Unconscious bias can also occur when policies or procedures appear neutral, but disproportionately affect members of a protected class. One study by the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) found that applicants with disabilities received 26% fewer expressions of interest from potential employers. NBER points to bias as the reason.



Not only do these biases affect our hiring practices, but also how we:

- Recruit people
- Orientate and train
- Mentor employees (or not!)
- Make job assignments
- Give people training opportunities
- Listen to people's ideas and suggestions
- Make promotional choices
- Give performance reviews
- Decide organizational policy
- Conduct marketing campaigns
- Choose board members
- Treat clients or customers
- And literally hundreds of other choices.

When bias is at play in any of these practices, it dramatically impacts our organizations. And almost all of it can be invisible to us. It is crucial for leadership and decision-makers to have an awareness of unconscious bias to make fair and equitable decisions.

MANY ORGANIZATIONS are taking proactive steps to root out and minimize the unconscious biases that can undermine diversity efforts and recruiting and retention program.

Strategic Government Resources has developed a groundbreaking new platform designed to overcome implicit bias in the recruitment process. Prospective candidates fill out a standard resume questionnaire addressing their background, experience, and interests. The prospect's name and employers are masked, eliminating implicit bias in this stage of the hiring process.

Freada Kapur Klein, founder of Level Playing Field Institute, suggests using San Francisco-based company Interviewing.io, which makes the process of technical interviews anonymous when hiring engineers.

The Royal Society scientific academy's decision-makers use the following guidelines that help keep unconscious bias in check:

1. **Deliberately** slow down your decision-making
2. **Reconsider** reasons for decisions
3. **Question** cultural stereotypes
4. **Monitor** each other for unconscious bias

By providing awareness training and putting procedures in place that identify biases, organizations can positive steps in minimizing biases that can impact every aspect of an organization.

"WE CANNOT **ELIMINATE** OUR BIASES, BUT WE CAN **UNDERSTAND THEM** AND KNOW THAT THERE ARE THINGS THAT WE CAN DO TO REDUCE THE IMPACT OF BIASES ON OUR DECISION-MAKING AND TO BETTER REFLECT DIVERSITY. **BEING AWARE** OF BIASES ALSO ALLOWS US TO **GUIDE OTHERS** TOWARDS CERTAIN DECISIONS OR BEHAVIORS WITHOUT TAKING AWAY THEIR FREEDOM TO CHOOSE. **ENCOURAGING PEOPLE** TO CORRECT BIASES DOES MORE THAN CHANGE THE WAY WE VIEW OTHERS, IT AFFECTS THE OPPORTUNITIES WE SEEK, TO CREATE **BETTER WORKPLACES, BETTER ORGANIZATIONS AND BETTER SELVES.**"

— SUZANNE BOCCALATTE

FIVE

STEPS TO REDUCE UNCONSCIOUS BIAS



Steve Thompson, who has worked in the area of Talent Development for 20 years, shares these steps to reduce unconscious bias in your workplace:

BE AWARE OF GENERALIZATIONS.

Stereotypical views and generalizations creep into our language. Listen and reflect on the language used by you and your colleagues. Be alert for misplaced adjectives, broad sweeping statements, and questions in conversations, meetings, reports and presentations: “The new trainees always want ...”, “Working moms never ...”, “Why can’t the finance team do ...”

CHALLENGE YOUR DECISION-MAKING.

Get into the habit of asking yourself, “Why am I thinking this way?” Be particularly aware of first impressions and gut reactions in your decision-making. These biases may be more prevalent when we are stressed, tired, or under pressure.

TAKE A TEST.

Harvard University have developed a series of Implicit Association Tests (the Harvard IAT) to enable individuals to discover any unconscious biases. These tests are online, open to all, and free to use. Businesses are now using these and similar tests throughout their organizations to actively address the issues of unconscious biases. Invest time in understanding your own tendencies by taking these tests. Once aware of any biases, you can take steps to own your personal biases, reflect on your behaviors, and introduce steps to reduce and eliminate bias from your actions.

AVOID GROUPTHINK.

We all have a tendency to surround ourselves with similar people – people like us. This is called affinity bias. Repeated, shared decision-making can lead to groupthink, and this may have unintended consequences for other groups.

WORK BEYOND YOUR COMFORT ZONE.

Look for ways to involve yourself with groups who have different backgrounds outside your organization. Look for opportunities to spend time with people who have similar skillsets but different working environments. Offer positive feedback to the work of different groups, not just your own.

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