Desire to Belong: The Human Trait of Unconscious Bias

Everyone has unconscious biases, using stereotypes to assess people and guide decision making. A desire to belong can stop people from moving beyond them.

The word "bias" in the workplace connotes discrimination, prejudice, and lack of inclusion. There are conscious and unconscious biases, and the latter has been the subject of a significant amount of psychological research over the last five years. Most biases are unconscious, largely formed through cultural experiences and learned over a lifetime. Unconscious biases reflect norms and beliefs assumed to be normal and lead to expectations that others should share the same beliefs and norms. The resulting distortion of relationships and situations based on unconscious biases impacts decision making, and for many the ability to lead in an inclusive manner. Overcoming unconscious biases is not easy because they are ingrained and unrecognized, explaining why organizations are having difficulty eliminating discrimination in the workplace. The organizations developing leaders able to make bias-free decisions, maintain bias free attitudes, and adhere to bias-free behaviors are more likely to develop an inclusive workplace.

Organizations continue to struggle to understand why their workplaces are not inclusive despite all the resources invested in developing and communicating D&I policies, offering diversity and inclusion workshops, instituting ERGs, and maintaining training websites. Often the end result is that blatant bias is dealt with simply because it is so obvious. Subtle bias is harder to root out of an organization. According to Dr. Sondra Tiedeman, author of Making Diversity Work: Seven Steps for Defeating Bias in the Workplace, bias is defined as "..an inflexible positive or negative conscious or unconscious belief about a particular category or group of people." The key words are "inflexible" and "entire group." Prejudice and stereotyping are based on inflexible beliefs about a large group of people.

What is the Manager Really Thinking?

Unconscious bias in the workplace can undermine the work of managers in many areas, but especially in the area of talent management. Unconscious biases may lead to flawed decisions in areas of recruitment and retention of talent, performance management, project and team management, collaborative processes, and so on. The bias influences how recruiters read and analyze resumes, determine if an employee is a good fit for the organization or a job, and how they select people for choice assignments or promotions.

It is not possible to know for a fact that someone is biased just by considering their behavior, the current approach to eliminating bias. Sometimes people act inappropriately with one or more people and are not stereotyping a group of people. This fact gets down to the real reason businesses

continue to have difficulty building truly diverse workplaces. They do not know what the people, especially the leaders, are thinking. Some people are simply making poor decisions or acting inappropriately due to lack of skills or knowledge. Others are making poor decisions or interacting with others based on their biases, and especially the unconscious biases which are not acknowledged but are influencing decision making and relationships.

Didn't Know I Believed That Way

Social psychologists are studying the interaction of unconscious biases and cognitive control which is how people direct their thoughts, leading to actions intended to meet goals. Unconscious bias, also called implicit social cognition, is activated involuntarily without the person having awareness of where the feelings and attitudes about other people are coming from. Another important aspect of unconscious biases is that the feelings and attitudes that develop about other people based on characteristics like age, gender, ethnicity, appearance, income level, and so on, are not necessarily aligned with what people say. In the workplace, leaders may believe their decisions are consistent with beliefs, when in fact it is the unconscious having the greatest influence. They think they are being objective when making decisions, but in reality they are not. Thus stereotyping continues.

Unlearning the associations leading to stereotyping is possible. It is a matter of regulating thought processes and making conscious decisions to choose what is associated in thoughts. For example, a white manager associates white employees with intellectual superiority, thus choosing white males and females for major complex projects. The manager believes diversity is achieved because the team includes men and women, and can justify the decision based on personnel information. In another example, a tech firm hires mostly Asian Americans because there is an unconscious bias towards Asians as being more capable in engineering and math. Note the latter bias embraces a kind of diversity but still manages to exclude other groups of qualified minorities. Managers must learn to decouple associations in order to overcome unconscious bias and develop a diverse team.

Debiasing by Uncoupling and Reforming Associations

Researchers have studied the best way to measure unconscious biases and concluded that people do not provide reliable information when self-reporting. The reason is that the information supplied is often influenced by the desire to be socially acceptable. People modify their answers based on what is perceived as acceptable. One of the most popular assessment tools used today is the Implicit Association Test (IAT). It measures the strength of associations between concept pairs by using a series of exercises, narrowing the negative associations representing unconscious bias.

Identifying unconscious biases is only a first step. Debiasing is a process in which new mental associations are formed through training, exposing people to those who are contra-stereotypical. Educating people to raise awareness of implicit bias is one strategy that is critical to changing automatic biases. When people are exposed to a variety of perspectives, it can increase awareness of their own biases. Holding people accountable is another strategy because justifying feelings and

actions to others raises personal awareness. Conducting anonymous employee surveys can help the company identify where bias exists.

Within the workplace, the people involved in recruiting, hiring, Human Resources, and management need to be made aware of unconscious biases they own. Some of the specific tactics used to minimize the impact of unconscious bias is having more than one person interview job candidates and adding more structure to interviews so conversations do not veer off. Recognizing unconscious bias exists is the first step and examining each step of the employee experience, from recruitment to termination to finding opportunities for expression of unconscious biases, is the next step. The results of the employee surveys and process assessments will guide the company in providing customized training to managers.