Awareness Plus Action Best Approach for Mitigating Bias

There is no magic solution to minimizing workplace bias. It takes a combination of employee awareness and organizational structures that reduce the opportunities to demonstrate bias.

The business world is fast paced, but that does not mean the way people think can be changed rapidly also. That has never been more apparent than when organizations try to modify biased decision-making and expressions of employee judgments. Expressions of conscious bias are easier to address because of their blatant expression. Unconscious biases begin forming in childhood so by the time someone is employed the beliefs are deep-seated and can become barriers to organizational progress. There are two approaches to mitigating bias. The first is modifying cognitive processes by raising awareness of bias. The second is architecting organizational processes to reduce opportunities to express bias. Both approaches are necessary to minimize bias and become an inclusive organization embracing diversity as a positive change.

Bias Flows to the Bottom Line

Conscious bias is easily spotted. For example, a manager finds excuses for never hiring a qualified minority or makes derogatory comments about women. These types of bias expressions are easier to deal with than unconscious biases. Unconscious biases are the result of the brain trying to prioritize information about people and events, and making sense of lifestyle inputs by developing a sense of comfort and safety with the familiar. Unconscious biases, also called hidden or implicit biases, is a process in which the brain puts people into predetermined categories based on how well they fit into the comfortable familiar.

Organizations that do not recognize and address biases will find the biases can have a significant impact on human capital processes. If left unchecked, they negatively impact the organizational culture and decision making. That prevents the business, small or large, from creating a diverse and inclusive workforce in which all talent is encouraged to pursue full capabilities and desired career path. Corporate research has shown that organizations with diverse workforces have a higher ROI than those that have institutional discrimination or lack of diversity. In that sense, bias flows directly to the bottom line.

Changing the minds and hearts of the workforce members with negative unconscious biases that lead to discriminatory acts is not simple. Biases are self-reinforcing. For example, a manager reads social media and finds statements made by a Hispanic that offends his beliefs, strengthening the unconscious bias towards Hispanics developed through years of acculturation. The Hispanic is then eliminated from the job applicant pool. The organization cannot stop employees from reading social media, but it can ensure the job applications are assessed in a non-discriminatory manner.

Tackling Bias at the Employee and Organizational Levels

Negative bias is about associations. People associate a person's characteristics, like gender or race or age, to undesirable qualities, like laziness or incompetency. Baby Boomers are finding themselves dealing with bias as older workers, with the younger generations assuming they cannot learn new technology. An interesting example of unconscious bias at work is that 15 percent of U.S. men are taller than six feet, but 60 percent of corporate CEOs are six feet or taller. Unconscious biases include a long list of reasons to discriminate.

Management has the ability to change the organization through a two-pronged strategy. The organization's degree of inclusion is as high as the ability of the workforce to recognize and correct their unconscious biases, and the organizational structures providing a context in which bias is difficult to express. It takes both approaches to create a diverse and inclusive organization – behavioral change and consistent systematic organizational support for the positive behaviors. One of the reasons bias remains entrenched in many organizations is that the individuals' unconscious biases and the organizational system are out of sync. People do not understand that their biases are inhibiting progress because the organization is not defining inclusive behaviors and forcing individuals to question their biases.

Real organizational change means each employee understands how their biases are impacting their relationships with stakeholders. Diversity as a positive bias replaces exclusion, and inclusion equates to behaviors that discourages exclusion. Individuals are trained and developed on the existence and expression of conscious and unconscious biases; the organization also needs to have policies, procedures, and systems in place that minimize exclusion and prevent discrimination. A good example of the organizational level process is a system of accountability that informs employees as to their expected behavior in hiring, employee development opportunities, promotions, and so on.

Dislodging Bias Through Bias Recognition

Businesses need to look at the big picture, incorporating all facets of operation. Mitigating bias is a matter of raising employee awareness, beginning with starting conversations about the impact of bias on decision making. Administering Harvard University's Implicit Association Test (IAT) to employees will measure the hidden preferences lurking in minds. The IAT uses flashed images of people, symbols, words, and things, and the survey-taker rapidly indicates their immediate reaction by choosing positive or negative words.

Providing the right type of development is crucial to dislodging biases. People need to learn how to recognize specific situations where bias is at work and to learn how to behave differently. Goal setting alone is insufficient to achieve change because it is an end result but the means of getting there are not developed. If the IAT indicates the organization has a high level of bias against diverse hiring, leadership may set goals and train Human Resources or managers but also needs to amend

the hiring process itself so that supervisors making the selection are limited in their ability to express bias.

Developing a diverse and inclusive culture requires a number of strategies implemented at the same time. Opportunities for discussions on biases should be plentiful. Develop policies and procedures that require managers to follow non-discriminatory practices. Altering the decision-making context to mitigate human bias is a behavioral approach. It is based on the belief that people's decisions are greatly influenced by the choices put in front of them.

Managers at all organizational levels can structure work and processes so that employees have opportunities to make unbiased selections. For example, teams can include members who question biased decisions as being out of alignment with organizational goals. Research is showing that awareness paired with organizational culture and structure just might be the key to finally mitigating workplace bias.