
Unconscious Bias: Why it Matters

By: Robin Pedrelli

We have clearly made great strides in the area of diversity & inclusion but almost everyone will admit we still have much to do. While in many cases organizations have successfully shifted the mindset around D&I, we still struggle to connect that mindset to real change, and few organizations can boast significant diversity at the top of the chain. An increased focus on unconscious bias can move the needle forward in significant ways. By helping individuals recognize, understand and manage bias in themselves a very enlightening and powerful experience that yields great results can take place.

How an investment in unconscious bias training can impact your organization:

Increased Awareness – Unconscious bias is just that – unconscious. Every single human being has bias and in many cases our bias effects our behaviors and our decisions in ways that we are not fully aware. By acknowledging the existence of bias and taking the “negative” connotation out of the bias conversation can be a very powerful and freeing first step in behavior change. It is important that the messaging reinforces the fact that the bias is not negative but the behavior may be. One needs to be aware of the effects of bias before one can change behavior.

Common Language – Once an organization welcomes the bias conversation into its culture, a common language will emerge that enables individuals to check their decision making process. It can become common-place where managers and leaders involved in hiring and promotion decisions, pulling together a team for a high-profile project, or even something as simple as planning a meeting will transparently assess the decision –making process and check for any presence of bias. It also becomes comfortable for coworkers to recognize and address the presence of bias in others. The

key is to create common language for open discussion and to strip all negativity and judgment from the conversation.

Intentional Behavior Change – Recognizing bias is only the first step. It is important that resources are provided that support behavior change. Unconscious bias training can help managers shift from a policies and procedures mindset to real engagement. Individuals often think they “get diversity” until those assumptions are challenged in real time – when checks are in place that enable individuals to assess the inclusiveness of every decision and action. When individuals who pride themselves as inclusive recognize limitations in themselves, aha moments take place and real champions are born.

Broader Definition of Diversity – Often organizations will focus diversity efforts in the areas of race and gender. While formalized programming addressing specific underrepresented employee groups is needed and encouraged, it can result in very limited progress and change. Unconscious bias enables organizations to take a much broader approach to diversity and should result in behavior change that positively impacts every one in the organization.

Real Culture Shift – When an organization as a whole begins to recognize unconscious bias and manages the way in which bias impacts the decision-making process, magic can happen. A culture will emerge where individuals are recognized for their unique contribution, where different perspectives are greatly valued and where creativity and innovation can thrive along side analytical minds. This kind of culture will have a positive impact on recruitment and retention, will serve as a competitive advantage and can result in a more positive and productive work environment.

Talent Optimization – Organizations will begin to see a dramatic change in the representation at all levels in the organization and in real engagement of its employees. When decision-makers recognize how their decisions can impact not just small segments of the employee population but all segments of the employee population, all employees can thrive. Organizations will be able to better address issues that impact diverse representation at the top of the organization will be better equipped to institute changes that will mitigate brain drain. It is important that organizations invest in some next steps that will address some of the current policies and behaviors that can be detrimental to the success of all employee groups.

Robin Pedrelli is the co-founder and partner of VisionSpring, Inc. VisionSpring, Inc. is a women owned and operated diversity and inclusion consulting firm offering fully integrated strategy development, workforce planning, training and continuous learning solutions to leverage diversity and inclusion to drive innovation and improved business outcomes. We provide customized strategic solutions that address the specific needs of each client and blend workforce, workplace, marketplace and community related goals.