ACADEMIA | Letters

The Intervention: Mitigating Unconscious Bias and Overt Discrimination, Celebrating Successes, and Transcending the Feedback & Criticism into Positive Change for Ourselves and Our Communities

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What can we do to change the prognosis that we must "identity switch" and remain silent and accepting of the status quo, as black women experiencing an intersectionality of cultural identities? How can we better prepare ourselves for encounters with other people with various cultural identities of their own, without disengaging from our own self-concept and downplaying our own worth? How can we be authentic about who we are even in the face of discrimination and prejudice from others towards the groups to which we belong?

Black women are underrepresented in business settings in this country. Moreover, we are represented less and less the higher up we climb on the corporate or executive ladder.

According to Catalyst.org (March 19, 2020):

> "In 2019, women of color represented 18% of entry-level positions. Few advanced to leadership positions: managers (12%), senior managers/directors (9%), VPs (7%), SVPs (5%), and C-suite positions 4%). In 2019, Black and Hispanic women made up a smaller percentage of total women employed in management, business, and financial operations occupations than white or Asian women."

To reiterate this unfortunate truth, as of the drafting of this article, only four Black female Presidents or CEO's are located in the United States upon an initial search. The Amazon-acquired tech start-up Zoox, an autonomous, zero-emissions vehicle company, boasts Black female CEO Aicha Evans at its helm. Warner Brothers also recently appointed Channing

Dungey to replace Peter Roth as its CEO. Rashida Jones was appointed in December 2020 as President of MSNBC. Roz Brewer, CEO of Walgreens, recently rose to power on January 26, 2021. Thus, despite these monumental milestones, there is still a dearth of Black female leadership in top echelons of organizational strata across this country.

To identify the barriers that exist which impede the ascension of black women up the corporate ladder, let us evaluate the facts. As noted by Vanessa Loder in a 2014 Forbes.com article featuring an interview with Tara Mohr, author of *Playing Big: Find Your Voice, Your Mission, Your Message*:

> Tara Mohr [a writer and CEO] believes that "centuries of women's exclusion from political, public, and professional life have had many effects. Some of those effects were external: legislation, formal policies, pay disparities, lack of legal protections, and the denial of women's basic rights." This external creation of inequality has internal effects in women. "Over generations, it shaped how we think of ourselves and what we see as possible for our lives and work. It shaped our fears – fears of speaking up, of rocking the boat, of displeasing others. It caused women to develop a number of [survival] behaviors…like conflict avoidance, self-censoring, people-pleasing, tentative speech and action."

These phenomena are magnified by the experiences of Black women in this country. Coupled with women's struggles for equality and human rights was, particularly for the Black woman, slavery and its reverberations, the post-emancipation era and the black codes, Jim Crow laws, the civil rights movement, affirmative action, and present-day racism. As Crenshaw (1989) describes, Black women experience an 'intersectionality" of oppressed identities in the United States, and the profound influence of Blackness and womanhood in one being express themselves inwardly and outwardly as a compound, more complex existence. To overshadow one experience [Blackness over womanhood or vice-versa] over the other is impossible for the Black woman who embraces each aspect of her identity.

Obviously, some intervention is necessary to mitigate the racist, misogynistic, homophobic, able-bodied/sound-mind, monolingual, and related biases which are rampant in our society, and subsequently, our work settings. These biases, left unchecked, lead to disastrous discriminatory practices in hiring, pay, promotion, evaluation, and other work-related consequences which impact marginalized group members' career advancement and professional trajectories.

There are several strategies identified in the empirical literature for mitigating racism and implicit or unconscious biases. A meta-analysis by Bezrukova et al. (2016) revealed that several strategies exist for ameliorating biases through diversity training initiatives. Among

these strategies, those which focus heavily on experiential learning (i.e., simulations, scenarios/vignettes, etc.) are more effective than those which focus solely on awareness or cognitive outcomes (i.e., learning) (Bezrukova, et al., 2016). Despite a moderate effect size for cognitive outcomes/learning, and smaller effects for diversity training's impact on behavioral and attitudinal affective outcomes, the effects of such training on attitudinal/affective outcomes attenuated over time, whereas effects of such training on cognitive learning remained stable after a period of time and in some instances even increased upon reexamination one year or more later (Bezrukova, et al., 2016).

These findings indicate that strategies which employ cognitive learning may only be effective at generating awareness of issues surrounding diversity, but these strategies may fall short at targeting attitudes and behaviors which are the real interest in diversity research. That is, discriminatory practices in particular are critical to examine in order to identify how we can prevent them from occurring, consciously or unconsciously.

As such, we propose other methods for implementation which receive partial support in the empirical literature. One such method is immersion training (Senior, 1998; Canfield, Low & Hovestadt, 2009), in which behavioral observations are recorded while diverse groups interact and have real work-related problems to solve. Feedback would be provided to participants on their encounters with diverse "others," and recommendations will be made to participants on how they can more effectively manage differences that arise in their interactions.

Another proposed intervention strategy would be to celebrate our successes, as cited by Kabir (2018). By cementing into our explicit and episodic memories the successes we have realized, celebrations can serve to buffer the harmful effects of self-defeating and negative thinking processes on our ascension.

Finally, feedback is a critical component in any leader's success. Receiving and being open to getting such feedback from mentors, supervisors, peers, and subordinates will play a vital role in the development of leaders to their full potential. One mechanism by which we can continually self-improve is to be open and receptive to constructive feedback. By transcending such criticism to positively change ourselves and our communities, we are better prepared to lead when our time comes. While any type of feedback is constructive, negative feedback is particularly important to digest and transcend if a leader wants to continue to progress professionally.

Jacquelyn Smith (2013) notes in her Forbes Magazine online article:

> "The very best way to take negative feedback is to ask a few basis questions
> to show that you are genuinely interested in resolving any perceived problems.
> 'Try to stay calm and stay focused on the negative feedback [and not your own
> emotions or reactions]'…Listen and actually hear what's being said. 'Do not get

defensive and start making excuses. Instead, you might say what you've learned and what you will do differently from now on.' Accept the negative feedback with openness and gratitude…'Even if you do not agree, you must keep in mind that feedback is intended to relay information. What you choose to do with it is your decision after the meeting." Further, her article notes that this strategy only applies to well-meant constructive criticism. In fact, "Unfair and overly negative feedback is also used as a tool by bad managers and workplace bullies to demean and control others. Do not put up with this kind of attack. If you do, it will persist."

We must take a proactive stance in furthering our own career development, as no one else will if not for our very own efforts. As black women, this will often mean being the "only" or the "first," or being forthcoming in asking for guidance, feedback, and mentorship. The intersectional identities that black women possess should not hinder our career progression, but often does due to the inequitable ecosystems in which our work is often embedded and the implicit biases that often plague the individuals we encounter in our journeys.

With the mentality that we shall lift even as we climb, we will advance not only our own but the careers of those who will proceed us. We must always remember that it is on many giant shoulders that we now stand. Members of our ancestors' generations often did not have the choices and access that we now have to the career opportunities before us. Let us seize them with tenacity and fortitude into what can and should be a bright future ahead.

About the Author

Dr. Ayanna Cummings is passionate about eradicating the malignant diseases of racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism, and other ills which plague our society. She has over 21 years of experience as a diversity consultant, specialist, and trainer. In her current role as Director of Diversity + Inclusion with Compass Group at Microsoft, Ayanna serves as a change agent for cultural

transformation. She has also served as an undergraduate Lecturer for twenty years at various institutions in the Northeastern and Southeastern United States, including a current role on the Faculty at Georgia Institute of Technology in the School of Psychology. Her scientific research seeks to examine the plight of, issues affecting, and identification of solutions relevant to African-Americans and other diverse and marginalized groups. Her research findings give her unique expertise

in diversity, equity, & inclusion training and consulting strategies and cultural change methods. As a volunteer leader, she serves as Chair of the HR for Change Committee with

SHRM-Atlanta and as Director of Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion with the NBMBAA Seattle Chapter. She is a graduate of Hampton University where she received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology in 2000, and Clark Atlanta University where she earned the MBA degree in Marketing in 2007. She also attended City University of New York Graduate Center, Baruch College where she earned the PhD, MS, and MPhil degrees in Industrial/Organizational Psychology in 2017 and 2014, respectively.