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3 Ways to Make Less Biased Decisions

by Howard J. Ross

Unconscious bias – judgments and behaviors toward others that we're not aware of – is everywhere in our lives. And while this type of bias may seem less dangerous in the workplace than it may be on the streets of Ferguson, Mo., or in a courtroom, it still leads to racial injustice.

In March 2013, a U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission report identified "unconscious bias and perceptions about African Americans" as one of seven "major obstacles hindering equal opportunities for African Americans in the federal work force."

In fact, simply having a name that sounds black can reduce the chance of you getting an interview, according to a study conducted by researchers at MIT and the University of Chicago. The research showed that this is true *even at companies that are actively looking for diversity in hiring.* Similar trends have been identified in virtually every aspect of the talent management system. For example, another study from the University of Warsaw, found that women described with feminine job titles (e.g. "chairwoman") are perceived (by men) to be as significantly less warm and marginally less competent than women with masculine job titles. And men reported that they were less likely to hire these women.

In my 30 years of consulting and research, I have seen this unconscious bias play out again and again. It not only results in lack of equity in organizations, but in poor talent management practices. How can we hire, retain, and develop the best people — regardless of race — if we are not even aware of the forces that dominate the choices we make?

Unfortunately, it is unlikely that we can eliminate our biases. We are learning more and more that they are a natural part of human functioning. Psychologist Joseph LeDoux refers to bias as our human "danger detector," as it provides a quick way to insure our safety. We make fast judgments about what is "normal" and what isn't and often this works in our favor. For example, a good leader may sense that certain behaviors are consistently more dependable in meeting client needs and may develop a "bias" toward those approaches. Even if they are not correct 100% of the time, they may still make more sense as a rule than approaching each client situation as if it has never happened before. Of course, that doesn't mean that one approach should be chiseled in stone.

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The good news is that there are things that we can do to mitigate the negative impact of biases on our organizational decision-making.

First, by realizing and accepting that we all have bias, we can learn to watch for it in ourselves and help others who work with us to do the same. This process of building awareness is similar to what happens when we step on the clutch in a standard transmission automobile. The motor doesn't stop running (bias doesn't stop), but the car is no longer moving forward. When we are on the lookout for biases, they are less likely to blindly dictate our decisions.

Second, we have to develop tactics that help us make decisions more consciously. There are three types of approaches that can help: *priming*; *reorganized structures and systems*; and *new forms of accountability*.

Priming is a memory effect that gets created when one activity subtly, and often unconsciously, impacts subsequent behaviors. By consciously priming people to pay attention to potential areas of bias, extensive research as well as our experience with clients has shown that they can be encouraged to be more conscious of their decision-making processes. For example, before reviewing resumes, managers can be asked to respond to a series of questions like:

"Does this person's resume remind you in any way about yourself?"

"Does it remind you of somebody you know? Is that positive or negative?"

"Are there things about the resume that particularly influence your impression?
Are they really relevant to the job?"

"*What assessments have you already made about the person? Are these grounded in solid information or are they simply your interpretations?"*
Similar safeguards can be put in place around many aspects of talent management: recruiting, interviewing, hiring, promoting, and performance reviews. As Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman said: "The odds of limiting the constraints of biases in a group setting rise when discussion of them is widespread."

Reorganizing structures and systems can also help reduce the impact of bias. Structure creates behavior in organizations and by creating consistency in how certain processes get carried out, you can encourage less biased behavior. For example, structured interviewing processes, in which the questions are consistent across candidates, have been found to reduce bias relative to unstructured or free-form interviews. In fact, as a rule, structured processes can reduce the patterns of unconscious bias that take over when people are just "trusting their gut" in informal structures like mentoring, managing, coaching, and reviewing performance.

Finally, you can put **new forms of accountability** in place so that it becomes clear when bias is occurring. For example, if a manager gives 10 performance reviews, five to men and five to women, and four out of the highest five are women, it should at the very least call for an inquiry into whether there might be a pro-female bias in the process. It might be total coincidence, but it is worth checking. You might get input from some colleagues who also work with the people being rated and see if they make the same evaluation.

Another place to encourage accountability is in diversity metrics. If you look at metrics individually you might argue that you're reaching your company's diversity goals of representation at each point in the process. But if you look at the batch of metrics together — for example, the percentage of people who apply for jobs, the percentage who are offered jobs, the percentage who accept those jobs, and the percentage who are successful in their jobs after six months — you are far more likely to be able to pinpoint the places in the system where breakdowns are occurring.

Bias may be as natural as breathing and it may very well be impossible to drive it out of human consciousness. But by shifting your mindset and inviting constant inquiry into how you make decisions, you can create businesses in which the diversity of your workforce is truly the strength that you hoped it would be.

Howard J. Ross is one of the nation's leading diversity consultants and a nationally recognized expert on diversity, leadership, and organizational change. He is the author of *Everyday Bias: Identifying and Navigating Unconscious Judgments in Our Daily Lives* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014) and *Reinventing Diversity: Transforming Organizational Community to Strengthen People, Purpose, and Performance*? (Rowman & Littlefield, 2011).

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