

Got an eye for “talent?” Better check that bias blind spot.

By Joe Gerstandt



Expert Forum



Some of the folks that I get the most resistance from when talking about bias are recruiters and hiring managers. They love to say things like “bigotry is stupid and bad business,” and “I just want to hire the best person for the job,” and “I don’t care about race.”

The word “bias,” is probably part of the problem, as it is one of those words that brings a bunch of baggage, but the truth is that we are naturally judgmental as human beings.

We make assumptions. We categorize. We jump to conclusions. We interpret what we see, hear and smell and give it meaning. The meaning that we give to what we see, hear and smell is often times more about us, our beliefs and our own life experience than it is about what we see, hear and smell and what it is actually evidence of. We all know a guy that only hires extroverts because they make the best sales people. We all know someone that believes a college degree is proof that someone follows through on things. Neither of these things are facts, they are simply beliefs that sometimes prove to be true and sometimes prove to be inaccurate.

We judge, and on one level, we understand this. Even recruiters do. We know that the world is a judgmental place, and we try to use that to our advantage by focusing on making a good first impression. Even recruiters do. Pro-tip: I squint, lower my head and cross my arms all the time, even when I am not unhappy, ashamed or defensive. We realize that the world is an incredibly judgmental place, but rather than address that head on and try to reduce it, we try to help our friends and family navigate better.

The reason that the world is a judgmental place (and that there are racial and gender disparities in nearly all aspects of our society) is that each of us are judgmental. Remind your friends and family that first impressions are important, but don’t forget to do some work on the other side of the equation as well. It is really, really hard for us to see our own bias, especially when we claim to have expert and unbiased perspectives on talent and ability...but it’s there, trust me.

Caring deeply about talent is not enough, you also have to have some appreciation for human nature, and specifically how we make decisions about people.

...from pages 248-251 in Blink, by Malcolm Gladwell.

“The world of classical music – particularly in its European home – was until very recently the preserve of white men. Women, it was believed, simply could not play like men. They didn’t have the strength, the attitude or the resilience for certain kinds of pieces. Their lips were different. Their lungs were less powerful. Their hands were smaller. That did not seem like prejudice. It seemed like a fact...”

Your bias never seems like bias to you, there is always some justification or evidence.

“It seemed like a fact, because when conductors and music directors and maestros held

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auditions, the men always seemed to sound better than the women. No one paid much attention to how auditions were held, because it was an article of faith that one of the things that made a music expert a music expert was that he could listen to music played under any circumstances and gauge, instantly and objectively, the quality of the performance.”

Articles of faith often hide big juicy truths and opportunities.

“But over the past few decades, the classical music world has undergone a revolution. In the United States, orchestra musicians began to organize themselves politically. They wanted the audition process to be formalized. That meant an official committee was established instead of a conductor making the decision all by himself. Musicians were identified not by name but by number. Screens were erected between the committee and the auditioner...”

Wait for it..

“And as these new rules were put in place around the country, an extraordinary thing happened: orchestras began to hire women. In the past thirty years, since screens became commonplace, the number of women in the top U.S. orchestras has increased fivefold.”

Shazam! There was now an evidence-based approach to identifying talent in place rather than an ideology chock full of unchallenged assumptions and these orchestras found more talent, some of it male, some of it female.

“What the classical music world realized was that what they thought was a pure and powerful first impression – listening to someone play – was in fact hopelessly corrupted.”

Hopelessly corrupted, you and I.

You cannot change what you do not acknowledge and you cannot be serious about talent without taking steps to mitigate the natural bias that shows up between human beings.

Be good to each other.