

How Can Unconscious Bias Training Go Wrong?

By *Simma Lieberman, The Inclusionist*



A senior leader at a high tech company called and said, "Simma, I just spent an enormous amount of money for a training program about unconscious bias. It was very well received and people are still talking about how much they liked it," he said. "However, nothing changed."

The demographics stayed the same, people of color, women, and LGBT people were still leaving at the same rate and getting hired by competitors and people were still working in silos.

He asked, "What did we do wrong?"

Within minutes I found out that he had never developed a diversity and inclusion vision and mission, nor did he have a strategy for culture change or expansion.

Unconscious Bias training was all he had done. He had unreal expectations that if he had the "right training," it would result in the "right culture." Rather than thinking long-term, and what it would take to create inclusion, he tried to take the easier, softer way. A Diversity and Inclusion Culture that results in breakthrough innovation involves transformation at every level, risk-taking and the willingness to be uncomfortable.

How to Add Value to Unconscious Bias Training

1- Start at the top to build a foundation and begin transformation. The CEO and other people on the executive team need to be the first ones to learn about unconscious bias and how it impacts their leadership behavior. We have our clients take the IAT (Implicit Association Test) from Harvard, to be aware of their own biases

Transformation begins at the top and doesn't stop!

2- Develop or review your diversity and inclusion mission and create a plan to engage the whole organization. Too often diversity and inclusion stays at the top. There is an unconscious (and sometimes conscious) bias that people at the lower levels don't need to be involved or won't understand the new culture. It only takes one biased employee to create havoc with your reputation.

3--Involve and seek input from people who manage all levels of the recruiting process. They need to be aware of their unconscious bias in the whole hiring process from where

and how they recruit, how they write the job description, how they conduct the interview, and ways in which they develop rapport.

4- Context unconscious bias as an obstacle for productivity, innovation, and achieving fast results. We've found that "unconscious bias training is most effective, when every system and process is reviewed for bias potential. Ex. Consciously or unconsciously giving more weight to candidates who went to certain schools no matter how many years ago, greeting candidates that seem similar to the interviewer with more warmth, unconsciously seeking reasons to eliminate someone from a different racial group, age, gender, sexual orientation and religion (when apparent.)

5- Make it real. So much of the discussion on unconscious bias never gets past the intellectual or theoretical realm. When that happens, people understand the concept, and can articulate the brain function but still never relate it to their own thinking and behavior. There is no actual change.

Take every opportunity to relate the learning to your overall diversity and inclusion vision and mission.

Before you spend your next dollar on unconscious bias training, ask yourselves if you just want people to have a good day, forget or not apply what they learn, or if you want ongoing change that will make you a benchmark organization and the employer of choice.

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