Article

The New Face of Bias In The Workplace - 2011
Part 1 - The Subtlety of Bias

by William (Bill) Shackelford

Introduction

In April 1999 eight African American employees of the Coca-Cola Company filed suit on behalf of themselves and 2200 similarly situated colleagues alleging discrimination in pay, performance evaluations and promotions. Coca-Cola denied the allegations but settled the case in late 2000 for $192.5M.

But wait a minute...we are not talking about a "diversity slacker." We are talking about an American icon, a world leader, one of the most recognized companies in the world. A company Fortune Magazine consistently ranks in its Top Ten of American's Most Admired Corporations. A company Hispanic Magazine includes on its list of 100 companies providing the most opportunities for Hispanics.

It is unthinkable that a global company like Coke -- a marketing company whose success depends on understanding cultural differences to capture world markets -- could be guilty of discrimination against its minority employees. Or is it?

It is unthinkable if you are using the classic definition of discrimination (i.e., conscience efforts to withhold opportunities from individuals/groups). However, this is a new day and a new paradigm exists for discrimination and bias in the workplace. Joel Author Barker, in his 1989 video The Business of Paradigms gave us a warning about what happens when paradigms shift. He stated:

> *"When a paradigm shifts, everyone goes back to zero. It doesn't matter how big your market share is or how* ***strong your reputation****, or how good you are at the old paradigm. With the new one, you go back to zero. Your past success guarantees you nothing"*

The paradigm shift in the workplace has been from overt bias to new, subtle forms of bias. These new forms of bias can be transparent to individuals looking through old lenses. However, they are quite obvious to individuals and groups impacted by the biases and can be just as effective in limiting their opportunities.

When you consider the paradigm shift in workplace bias, you quickly realize that, yes, even a great company like Coke (with a good track record for hiring diverse employees) can be guilty of bias. You also realize that if it can happen there, it can happen anywhere, in any workplace in America and abroad.

A New Subtle Form of Bias

An understanding of how bias creeps into today's workplace starts with an understanding of the expanded definition of bias. In our training and consulting we define bias as:

> *"**Intentional** and **unintentional**, **conscious** and **subconscious**, attitudes, behaviors and actions that have a negative and differential impact on segments of the society, or favor one segment of the society."*

The definition identifies four distinct categories of bias...intentional, unintentional, conscious and subconscious.

Most employers have adopted "fair employment practices" designed to manage the classic forms of bias (i.e., intentional and conscious). Examples of intentional and conscious bias would be actions by individuals or organizations designed to intentionally discriminate against individuals because of their race, gender, ethnicity or other diversity dimensions. Refusing to hire people of color or to promote women are classic examples from the past. This type of bias is rarely seen in today's workplaces and, when present, is obvious to individuals inside and outside of the organization.

However, current policies and practices are ineffective tools for managing the subtle forms of bias. To understand the more subtle forms of bias consider the following example. If I said "I met with my doctor yesterday to discuss the results of my blood tests," the average person might respond "What did HE say?" Society has conditioned us to equate certain professions (or positions) with a particular gender. This conditioning is where the unintentional and subconscious biases reside.

These subtle forms of bias subtlety impact the hiring and promotion process. For example, when selecting between two "equally qualified candidates," raters often will select the candidate who matches their stereotypical picture of the "right fit" for the position. They will arrive at this decision by accentuating the positive attributes of the traditional candidate and, likewise, focusing on the negative attributes of the other candidate. In addition, they may use the diversity characteristics of the candidates as strikes against them. For examples, they may question the loyalty of the female

candidate because she is also a parent (or of child bearing age). Or, they may raise concerns about how customers (or employees) will respond if the person of color is hired/promoted.

Under these circumstances, the decision to hire/promote is not based solely on the qualifications of the candidates (objective criteria). It is greatly influenced by subjective criteria (their "fit"). When these subjective criteria relate to fixed diversity dimensions of candidates (race, gender, age, sexual orientation, etc.), the resulting decision is inherently bias. The organization may be blind to the biases and insist the process was fair and unbiased.

Subtle Bias and the Glass Ceiling

Because of our heighten sensitivity to diversity issues, many individuals/organizations have begun to work on managing the impact of subtle biases on the hiring/promotion process -- with noticeable success for entry-level positions (i.e., hiring/promoting individuals into positions with limited organizational impact).

However, the bias becomes more difficult to manage as the responsibilities of the position increase. This is a major factor contributing to the glass ceiling experienced by people of color and women in many organizations. Unchecked subtle biases explain why the percentages of people of color and women decrease as you move up the position/pay scale in most organizations. Why women and people of color receive less pay than their white male counterparts. It also explains why people of color and women who make it to senior management are more likely to lead support (rather than revenue-generating) operations.

Identifying Subtle Bias

It is difficult (if not impossible) to identify the subtle forms of workplace bias by examining individual hiring/promotion decisions. For each case there will be ample justification for the decision made. The best way to identify subtle bias is to look for its impact on workplace demographics.

Because most organizations assume their strong anti-bias policies provide them a shield from discrimination, they expend little or no effort looking for biases that may exist. When individuals raise concerns about bias, these organizations will quickly dismiss such claims as "perceptions of a misguided few." They will not easily get to eradicating the subtle biases that do exist because they are in a state of denial. Reality

is that this form of bias exists in every organization. The question is not whether it exists in your organization but, what are you doing to identify and eradicate it?

Eradicating Subtle Bias

The first step in eradicating bias is acknowledging the fact that it may exist. Once acknowledged, organizations should gather sufficient data to prove or disprove the specific concerns raised. Here are five questions every organization can ask to identify the existence of subtle biases.

1. Is there a significant difference in **Pay** (mean, medium, average) for people of color, women and caucasian (or caucasian male) employees doing similar work?

2. Is there a significant difference in the **Performance Evaluations** (percent favorable) for people of color, women and caucasian (or caucasian male) employees?

3. Is there a significant difference in time between **Promotions** for people of color, women and caucasian (or caucasian male) employees?

4. What **Positions** (support versus revenue producing) are held by the most senior people of color and women in the organization?

5. Is there a significant difference in the percentages of people of color, women and caucasian (or caucasian male) employees in **Senior/Executive Positions** versus mid-level positions?

In developing responses to the questions, organizations must take care to account for factors that do not relate to subtle biases (such as workforce availability factors). Analysis of the data will give most organizations sufficient information to detect the existence of subtle biases. A cultural audit may be necessary to pinpoint the sources and exact nature of the biases, and to identify remedies.

Managing Bias

Subtle bias exists in every workplace. The good news, however, is that many employees recognize this fact. When employees raise issues of bias, they often do so out of concern for the organization. They want to bring the issue to the attention of the organization, improve the workplace and/or remove barriers to success. Most of all, they want to be heard and have their concerns taken seriously. They realize that differences in pay, performance evaluations, promotions and positions (between their group and others) are not explained by perceived differences in intelligence, ability or work ethic. They also know that people of color and women have the same innate

abilities for success found in other groups. Therefore, they are already convinces that subtle biases exist.

Properly responded to, concerns of bias typically can be managed internally. This requires an effective process for identifying and eradicating bias. This cannot be done by edict or by a few visionaries. It requires consistent and continuous action by leadership, management and employees. The following six steps provide a starting point for organizations that are ready to try new tools to tackle bias in its current form.

1. Accept the fact that biases may exist in your organization.
2. Implement a periodic data gathering process (e.g., annual employee opinion survey, cultural audit) to identify issues of bias.
3. Take corrective action based on the results of the data gathered.
4. Establish an accountability system.
5. Monitor the identified issues (over time).
6. Provide feedback to the organization on the issues identified and actions taken (to be taken).

The Coca-Cola Company has survived its 2000 diversity challenge. Along the way it learned valuable lessons about bias in the workplace and has become an even better place to work...for all employees. Other organizations will either learn from the Coke situation and take a more proactive approach to identifying and eradicating subtle bias or, suffer through similar turmoil. The good news is, now, organizations have a choice.

About the Author

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