

Article



The New Face of Bias in The Workplace

by [William G. Shackelford](#)

Part 2 - The Mishandling of Bias

I truly believe most major employers in the United States are serious in their concerns about reducing (or even eliminating) bias and/or discrimination in their organizations. Most have non-discrimination policies, have conducted diversity training and have even (on occasions) reprimanded employees and/or managers who failed to follow established policies.

Despite the good intentions, there is ample evidence that bias has not been completely eradicated in corporate America. Consider this excerpt from the EEOC 2008 report.

“The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) received a total of 82,792 private sector discrimination charge filings last fiscal year, the highest volume of incoming charges since 2002 and the largest annual increase (9%) since the early 1990s.

According to the EEOC’s FY 2007 data, allegations of discrimination based on race, retaliation, and sex were the most frequently filed charges, continuing a long-term trend. Additionally, nearly all major charge categories showed double digit percentage increases from the prior year -- a rare occurrence. The jump in charge filings may be due to a combination of factors, including greater awareness of the law, changing economic conditions, and increased diversity and demographic shifts in the labor force.”

In the first article of this series I stated there has been a “paradigm shift in the workplace from overt bias to new, subtle forms of bias. Properly responded to, concerns of bias typically can be managed internally but, identifying and eradicating subtle bias requires

a different kind of process.” It is the lack of effective processes (not lack of effort) where most organizations today fall short in their attempts to manage subtle bias.

New day/old tools

The most common process used to handle complaints of bias in the workplace was developed years ago – at a time when employers had nearly unlimited power over their employees. Then, managers acted as “lords” over their employees; employees were expected to obey and follow their managers (right or wrong, good or bad, fair or unfair) without question.

Today’s workplaces and workers have changed drastically. Employee empowerment programs are being implemented in white collar, blue collar and other environments. Employees expect a certain level of autonomy. They also expect barriers to productivity and personal success to be removed by the organization. When subtle bias is perceived as one of the barriers, these new employees expect organizations to identify effective tools to remove it as a barrier.

Why the typical method fails

When issues and concerns of bias are raised in today’s workplace, it is the initial response by the organization or its leaders that will either: 1) move them toward a positive resolution; or 2) heighten frustration and mistrust.

The most common (and least effective) response to accusations of bias is when the organization and its leaders take a defensive posture because accusing an organization of being biased is tantamount to accusing an individual of being a racist. They will cite their strong anti-bias policies, procedures and programs, and the fair-minded character of their managers as proof that the allegations of bias are false. They fail to realize that it is possible to have the best people, processes and programs and still have bias.

Organizations that believe they have built a shield from bias tend to follow the same dysfunctional pattern. I call it the **Culturally Incompetent Model for Managing Bias**. It includes the following actions on the part of the organization or its leaders:

They downplay or fail to recognize the importance of the issue.

They deny the reality of the issue or assume it is the isolated perception of just the individual(s) raising the issue.

They defend the organization, management team, policies, etc. as being fair (e.g., site the organization's policy of zero tolerance for bias).

They ignore evidence supporting the position of those raising the issue (or request that an inordinate amount of data be generated to prove the allegation).

They attempt to demean the character of the individual(s) raising the issue.

They may take action under pressure but, will deny any fault.

This model never leads to a successful resolution. Even if the organization eventually takes all of the actions the complainant requested, the process it took to get there leaves both sides feeling unsatisfied. The complainant may feel the organization resisted making the changes and only did so because of pressure. They often will feel the organization still does not accept the fact that bias exists. Therefore, once the pressure is off, the organization will go back to "business as usual" and hard fought gains will be quickly eroded.

The organization often feels they were wrongfully accused and, therefore, bitter about the concessions made to address what they see as "the perceptions of a few." They may not feel committed to the concessions made and, therefore, may not seek buy-in by all of the employees and managers. The net effect will be the apparent "positive" resolution of the issue actually heightens the stress among employees and between employees and managers.

Culturally competent model for managing subtle bias

If the old model is ineffective in dealing with issues of subtle bias, then what should organizations do? The first step is to increase the individual and collective cultural competence of the organization (e.g. the skill to work effectively in the context of cultural differences). Therefore, when issues of bias are raised, there will be a higher level of awareness to the fact that perceptions of bias may be reality. The following six-step process will help organizations take a positive approach to managing perceptions of bias.

- **Accept the fact that perceptions of bias may be reality.**
Do not assume that because you have policies against it, that it can not exist. Do not assume that because you do not see it, that it does not exist. Oftentimes subtle bias is nearly transparent to everyone except the victims. Manage your natural tendency to view allegations of bias as a personal attack and, instead,

see them as opportunities to more fully actualize your organization's goals of fairness.

- **Gather facts that will prove or disprove the perceptions.**
It is important that the data collection effort is done in a positive and collaborative manner. Stress the fact that you are gathering data to move the organization toward action (e.g., "I want you to work with me to gather more data so that we can develop an effective plan of action."). A culturally incompetent organization uses the request for data as an excuse for inaction (e.g., "I need more data before I will believe your perceptions are true.").
- **Take corrective action (as needed).**
Corrective action is often fairly easy to take with intentional acts of bias committed by an individual. However, it can be very painful to address subtle biases that often are unintentional and collective (i.e., institutional biases). Regardless of the nature or source, organizations must be committed to taking the actions necessary to eliminate identified biases.
- **Establish systems of accountability to manage subtle bias long-term.**
Policies, procedures, mandates, and edicts alone will not successfully manage subtle bias in organizations. Ask the employees with the best view of the issue to help you establish an accountability system that they feel will be effective. You will be surprised at how quickly they respond and how simple and effective their system may be.
- **Monitor the issue over time.**
Establish set times when the issue will be revisited, progress checked, reports written or discussions held. Monitoring is the only way to ensure that the corrective actions implemented have taken root in the organization (i.e., have become a part of the culture).
- **Provide feedback to individuals who raised the issue.**
Oftentimes, organizations take action but fail to provide adequate feedback to the individuals who raised the issue. Therefore, they may perceive the issue as having not been addressed and lose trust in the organization. Generally, formal responses (e.g. written reports, articles in the organization newsletter) are preferred.

Benefits of managing bias effectively

By taking an aggressive and positive approach to managing issues of bias, organizations put themselves on the side of the employee raising the concerns (as opposed to creating an adversarial relationship). It allows the organization to model teamwork under conflict and builds a higher level of cultural competence within the organization.

Most importantly however, it builds (as opposed to destroys) trust between employees and managers. Even if some of the employees do not agree with the conclusions or the actions taken, they will respect the fact that the organization tackled the problem head on. Employees and managers will know the organization is serious about reducing (or even eliminating) bias and/or discrimination. I do believe that is the goal...right?

About the Author

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