

Three crucial questions for uncovering unconscious bias in the workplace.

business issues

BATTLING BIAS

BY NATALIE HOLDER

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION have definitely received increased attention over the past 20 years.

Studies have shown that diversity management tops the list of priorities that businesses will have in the coming years. And within the last 10 years there has been an explosion of senior-level diversity officer roles in corporations, higher education and law firms. With all of these resources being put toward increasing diversity, why have most organizations have yet to achieve the change they seek?

You might not have an answer because despite much societal advancement, there are still plenty of reminders that people are treated unfairly because of their faith, how they look or how they sound. Part of the problem is likely that we do not know *how* to achieve the diversity we seek.

Diversity or Inclusion?

In the workplace, part of the issue is not knowing the difference between diversity and inclusion. Think of the high school lunch table as a metaphor for experiencing the distinction between the two. Do you remember what your high school cafeteria looked like, sounded like and smelled like? You probably had a group of friends that you ate lunch with every day. Imagine that one day, you asked a different group if you could sit with them, and they enthusiastically made room for you. However, after a few minutes at this new table, you noticed that you were not a part of the conversation. People were making plans for the weekend without asking if you would like to join them. When you tried to tell a joke, everyone stared at you dismissively. People talked over you and cut you off mid-sentence. While you were invited to sit at the table, you were not invited to *engage* at the table. Many organizations do a great job of recruiting for the diversity they seek but fail to create inclusive environments.

Engagement is a measurement of a person's inclusion in an organization and drives the overall quality of the human capital brought to the table. Esteemed psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs poses that everyone has needs that must be met before they can reach self-actualization. In the workplace, an employee's safety and psychological needs are most likely taken care of because their jobs provide the financial resources to clothe and feed themselves. However, the difficulty in most workplaces starts with the social needs.

When you have friends and positive relationships at work, it creates a sense of *belonging*. The next level of the hierarchy is *esteem* needs. Everyone has a need to have their work recognized by senior leadership. If employees never hear that they are doing a good job, they may doubt their work and themselves.

Lastly, if all your other needs are met, you may reach the level of *self-actualization* at work. Self-actualization is the point where you take initiative and solve the critical problems in your organization. When your social and esteem needs are met, you have the space, room and security to

think about new and different ways to contribute to your company's business goals. But if one of these rungs on the ladder to engagement is missing, it can have a negative impact the organization. For instance, employee turnover is one consequence of not having engagement. If your organization had 7,500 employees—and 50% are women and non-white—but saw a 3.6% attrition rate with this population, it would cost the organization \$220,000 if it costs \$10,000 to replace one employee.

Unconscious Bias

So how and why does exclusion still take place when there are direct benefits to inclusion? Often, without even realizing it, people engage in micro-inequities that are driven by their unconscious biases. Micro-inequities are the subtle gestures, comments and interactions that make you feel included or excluded by others. It's feeling ignored when you're talking

Inviting someone to sit at the table
is not the same as inviting them
to *engage* at the table.

Natalie Holder is an employment lawyer, speaker, corporate trainer and author of *Exclusion: Strategies for Increasing Diversity in Recruitment, Retention, and Promotion*. In 2013, New York University honored her with the Martin Luther King, Jr. Humanitarian Award. For more information on Natalie, visit www.questdiversity.com.



to someone and they glance at their watch when you make an important point. It's being left off of an email chain when you should have been included. Think of micro-inequities as the waves that threaten to erode your beautiful beach house that sits on wooden stilts. Over time, the waves deteriorate the wooden stilts, often in ways that are unseen by the eye.

While there are a number of ways to uncover exclusion and unconscious bias in an organization—and eventually eradicate it—the process can start with three questions:

- Is there a team member who would view my feedback as negative if I give them any feedback at all?
- Who on the team do I dislike working with?
- Which person on the team am I having an exceedingly difficult time getting to know?

Often, without even realizing it,
people engage in micro-inequities that
are driven by their unconscious biases.

Most likely, the person(s) who surface in your responses are feeling excluded from your work groups.

In a training session for a large government agency, there was a senior leader who admitted that while he was committed to diversity as a cause, he was not putting his actions into practice with certain individuals on his team. He courageously admitted that he created a self-fulfilling prophecy where his favorite employees were excelling while the others, whom he did not connect with and had ignored, were struggling. Invitations to his afternoon coffee excursions to Starbucks were only extended to the people on his team that he liked and connected with.

Even those with the best intentions have difficulty tying their words to their actions. Creating an inclusive culture requires shaking our unconscious minds awake and questioning our actions. ■