

9 March 2007

Hide and Prejudice

Understanding and managing hidden biases in workplace

Key Learnings:

- The difference between explicit bias and implicit bias
- The use of Implicit Association Tests
- Guidelines to reduce the consequences of hidden bias

Having bias and discrimination in the workplace is not a good thing. Research in the area of concealed biases has revealed that though considered to be absent, biases remain as a mental residue. Even as managers consciously steer clear of prejudice and favor equality, inherent biases determine their actions.

Bias of any kind is illegal and people are aware of this. Legally, explicit discrimination is subject to prosecution. But implicit bias is difficult to pinpoint or charge. So, instead of saying, “We do not hire disabled people or blacks” organizations mask their preferences.

Picture this!

A trimly attired young man and a middle-aged plainly dressed man come for an interview. Both are equally qualified and the interviews have been equally satisfying with the two. The manager is confused and finally decides to hire the young man. Why? His justification often is an incomprehensible reason that says ‘the other applicant will not fit in right’. This inexplicable reason prompts an action that spells ‘buried or hidden biases.’

Sounds familiar to most of us? Biases like the above have determined the selection processes, which affect the productivity and quality of organizations. Not to forget lawsuits that can eventually erode business reputation. Concealed bias will ultimately lead to higher employee turnover, shortage of skills and dearth of real talent. With so many unforeseen consequences, is it wise that organizations ignore hidden bias and its impact on productivity?

“Hidden bias will affect turnover and, at the end of the day, people who are hurting inside will inevitably hurt someone else—they will hurt your business, impact your customers and drain your productivity,” warns Quinetta M. Roberson, associate professor of human resource studies at the Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations.

Role of HR

The problem with implicit bias is that the manager is seldom aware of its existence. Helping individuals recognize and address this issue is a big challenge for HR.

Diversity panel

Quinetta M. Roberson advises organizations to use a diversity panel to minimize bias. This takes into account a wide range of diversity issues. HR must actively participate by

TenStep Supplemental Paper

initiating working groups in the hiring processes, promotions, rewards and performance measures that help steer clear of bias. The management must encourage complete work applications like teamwork, training and mentoring that benefits employees.

Many organizations conveniently overlook the need to interview the interviewers. Additional training for the interviewers can yield better judgments. Similarly, using multiple interview techniques, which necessitate people from different backgrounds, is highly favored to rule out discrepancies. Structured interviews irrespective of demographics curtail prejudiced decision-making.

“Unstructured interviews have a tendency to make snap judgments based on superficial criteria, and then spend most of an interview confirming first impressions rather than getting to know the candidate in an open-minded way.”

Performance appraisals must be more objective in nature. 360-degree and multi-rater are most preferred. Special emphasis must be on the language used during the reviews. Sometime, hidden messages or meanings surface unwittingly. For instance, a performance appraisal that concludes, “Kathy is bad at multi-tasking” is very different from saying “Kathy couldn’t meet specified goals, so the poor results.” Understanding the assessments with profundity is an HR imperative.

Implicit Association Tests

Psychologists at Harvard, the University of Virginia and the University of Washington developed “Project Implicit” that help identify and measure implicit bias through Implicit Association Tests, or IATs. IATs are an excellent way to develop understanding of unaware bias.

“IATs cover race, gender, ethnicity, weight, age, religion, disability and sexual orientation. A frequently asked questions section addresses how to interpret results, the status of the IAT, and the relationship between prejudice and stereotypes.”

For example, if the participant wants to see his stance regarding people’s weight, a series of combinations like fat and thin and good and bad are displayed. Grouping two sets simultaneously is what the participant needs to do. The test “measures the thumbprint of the culture on our minds,” says Harvard psychologist Mahzarin Banaji.

Paul Steven Miller, a law professor at the University of Washington remarks, “the test may be helpful in challenging people in a nonjudgmental way to think about biases they may harbor.” No employee or manager will want to accept that he is biased in his approach. IATs suitably bring to light these hidden prejudices.

One can take the Implicit Association Test online at <http://implicit.harvard.edu>.

Working towards a bias free work culture

- Custom-made web sites assist employees to undertake IATs in the workplace. Anonymity is ensured and the employee gets the summary or results of the test with complete security.



TenStep Supplemental Paper

- IAT workshops that focus on the science of IATs, group IATs and interactive forums encourage participation from the employees. Furthermore, experienced staff members can conduct group IATs across the organization.
- Organizations that encourage communication and honesty build better workforces in the due course
- The use of stringent HR policies to deal with unpleasant behavior. HR, along with employees, must provide for new procedures that can deal with discrimination aptly.
- Encourage anti-bias training workshops or seminars that psychologists design to bring to light the negative aspect of hidden bias and the necessity to address it.
- Developing informal forums to address any issues of prejudice before the HR can help

Bury bias

Reaching a bias-free environment is tough, but reducing bias benefits the organization immensely. Over time, as people interact with peers and co-workers, biases are replaced by meaningful relationships. When interactions develop into associations, one moves away from stereotypes and becomes more open in approach.

Brian Nosek, assistant professor of psychology believes, “We need biases in many contexts—I have a bias against foods that make me sick. This is an adaptive bias. The challenge is to identify those situations in which our implicit biases contradict our explicit values. Those are the ones that individuals, organizations and cultures will likely want to confront and curtail.”

So, follow the adage, “Never judge a book by its cover”.