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ORGANIZATIONS

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5 Ways Business Leaders Can Address Implicit Bias

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💡 BASED ON INSIGHTS FROM

Tessa Charlesworth

SUMMARY For business leaders, confronting implicit bias within themselves and their organizations is an imperative. This article shares five ways to identify and address implicit biases in the workplace to ensure an organization can thrive... [more](#)

If you ask most well-intentioned people, they may be able to tell you where some of their biases lie. But we are not always aware of, or willing to talk about, all of our biases. So getting someone to drop their guard and own up to the negative attitudes that they may not be conscious of can be a lot more difficult.

For business leaders, confronting implicit bias both within themselves and within their organizations isn't just optional—it's an imperative, says [Tessa Charlesworth](#), an assistant professor of management and organizations at Kellogg and director of the Change Lab.

The business case for addressing bias through a diverse workforce has long been established: teams with different backgrounds and perspectives [perform better](#) and can also equip a firm to better serve a diverse customer base. For leaders, that translates to ensuring an environment in which everyone feels as though they can succeed in their role.

“Inclusive leadership is actually an intrinsic goal that most people have, regardless of their politics,” she says. “It’s not just, ‘Kumbaya, let’s all be really happy here.’ It’s, ‘I want to be a compassionate and strong leader who

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their own biases to be able to do so. But given how unpleasant that can be, Charlesworth suggests they start by looking around.

Email



“One of my first prescriptions that I usually give to people is, just notice the biases in your environment, or even the biases that other people express,” she says. “So often, it’s easier to notice the faults that are out there, before we start to turn the lenses on ourselves and notice our own faults and our own decision-making.”

Charlesworth gives the example of a hotel chain where a guest noticed that the automatic towel and soap dispensers at one of its locations weren’t working when they waved their hands in front of the sensors. The person suggested it could be because they had Black skin which reflected light for the infrared sensor in a different way from white skin. “The management was suddenly like, ‘Shoot, we’ve literally never thought about this before,’” Charlesworth recounts. It was a form of structural bias that was unintentional but nevertheless affected its employees and, undoubtedly, the hotel’s guests as well.

Although it is unclear how exactly the management responded, in the best-case scenario, that discovery would encourage senior leaders to examine what other forms of bias might be buried in their operations and decision-making. Were the bathrooms accessible and usable for people with mobility issues? What about their hiring processes? The soap dispenser revelation could have been the lightning rod moment that led to the chain doing firm-wide audits on a range of issues.

These efforts still don't let leaders themselves off the hook, though, cautions Charlesworth.

"I always say, start with the structures, because people are so resistant to looking inside themselves and noticing their flaws," she says. "But don't stop with the structures, because they can become a crutch."

Find a trusted colleague to call you out

Identifying biases doesn't have to be a solitary pursuit. "It doesn't just rely on us sitting in a dark room and meditating on all of our failings," says Charlesworth. In fact, for such a psychologically challenging process, it can help to have a trusted colleague to get it rolling.

"People don't like changing their own minds, and it's really uncomfortable to reflect on our failings and our blind spots," she continues. "So find a buddy that you can trust is being honest and authentic, and have them start to challenge you on some of your beliefs, or things you say in meetings, or how you approach hiring decisions."

This step will only be possible if people already feel they're working in a psychologically safe workplace, where they can raise their hands and offer different perspectives or disconfirm information. But the results can be eye-opening.

Charlesworth offers an example from her own life. She enjoys sports and was a competitive dancer growing up. When she suggested to her colleagues that they do team-building exercises, the activities were often physically rigorous—such as hiking or surfing. What she didn't consider was that these options might not appeal to, or be possible for, her colleagues with different bodies, abilities, or relationships to physical activity. Her colleagues

of relationships to physical activity. Her colleagues challenged her assumptions, telling her, “You know, not everyone can do that.” It gave her the chance to recognize her own implicit bias.

“Those kinds of challenging moments were really great to then think about, Where is that coming from? What are the origins of those kinds of biases, and how could I start to uproot it without always needing someone to call me out on it?” she says.

Take accountability

In locating biases throughout an organization, structures matter. But it is helpful to keep in mind that those structures are composed of individuals. Citing the soap dispensers that didn’t recognize Black skin, Charlesworth notes that individuals made the decision to install them without, for example, testing them on different skin tones.

Ensuring accountability, even for biases that appear to be structural, will become even more important as firms incorporate automation and artificial intelligence in their operations. Automated resume screening, for example, may result in candidate pools without any women or people from minority backgrounds.

“Even though these algorithms are part of structures, there are people who made decisions about how the algorithm would be trained and what data to use to train it,” says Charlesworth, such as providing the algorithm with an example of what a good resume looks like. Pointing out structural bias may be simpler and less likely to make employees defensive, she says, but “we can’t stay in that comfortable spot for too long—we have to remember that structures are made up of individuals.”

Weave it into the cultural fabric

Leaders can also address biases by weaving diversity efforts into the very fabric of firm culture, using every opportunity to emphasize it as one of the organization's core values. This can take a number of forms, including visual reminders, mission statements, and diversity efforts incorporated into the firm's operations.

Maybe a firm has made concrete steps in its hiring processes to recruit a diverse team. But if it's a customer-facing company, its leaders can be vocal about the diversity of the people it serves as well. They may remind their colleagues that the company has a mission to serve a consumer base that may have different beliefs, different abilities, or different genders, Charlesworth suggests.

Companies can also use visual cues, such as a firm's logo rendered in rainbow colors to symbolize Pride, to signal a widely shared value. "Those cues may operate at a superficial level, but they're symbols that reflect deeper values," says Charlesworth.

People in leadership can also utilize their personal networks to ensure these values permeate the company.

"If you're a C-suite executive, for instance, and you have a team below, get them to start to leverage their networks and spread these messages into each of their teams as well," she says. "All of those things are subtle organizational cues that, repeated often enough, become part of the fabric of the organization."

Keep the momentum on dismantling biases

Being able to spot and address bias is important for leaders of all ages, but it may be especially critical for

readers of all ages, but it may be especially critical for older and longer-tenured ones.

“As we get older, our habits become even more ingrained for many reasons,” Charlesworth points out, including changes in executive function and fluid intelligence. “We rely more on habits than new experiences.”

Long-serving executives may also feel their experience allows them to operate on autopilot. But that mindset makes it easy to miss biases.

“They’re not going to notice that the soap dispenser doesn’t work for a Black colleague, because they think, ‘It’s always worked for me for 30 years,’” says Charlesworth. “Those leaders may even be the most resistant to change.”

She encourages leaders again to start by looking at structures, but when it comes time to reflect inwardly, to pair up with a younger team member for “reverse mentorship.” An employee who has joined in the last two years, for example, can offer a different perspective on the organization. This mentorship should unfold under a formal rubric structured to elicit useful insights, while ensuring the younger employee feels secure enough to speak candidly.

“There’s an institutional process in which that older manager, the leader who’s been there for 30 years, has to ask questions to the one who’s only been there for two years,” Charlesworth says. This process doesn’t have to be adversarial or even explicitly critical. It can consist of simple questions, such as: What are you noticing? What should I be changing? What are the norms that *you* see, and how might they be updated to address unconscious biases?

“Even if they’re not directly challenging what that mentor is doing,” she says, “just giving voice to a completely different experience in the organization can be enough for the mentor with 30 years’ experience to start to do the self-reflection right there.”

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