

Avoiding insanity: sponsorship and unconscious bias

By: Veronica Cool ⌚ March 15, 2015



Studies from the Harvard Business Review and from Catalyst indicate higher profitability and productivity when a more diverse workplace environment exists, one with an emphasis on inclusion. Yet the numbers that measure employment diversity, including attorneys and senior leaders in corporate and public sectors, have remained virtually unchanged across most industries.

Sheri Zachary, director of career development at Saul Ewing LLC, and I collaborated recently and believe the disconnect is likely attributable to “unconscious bias,” preferences of which we are not aware but which influence our common, everyday decisions. Those impressions typically result in subtle, unintentional and unconscious discrimination — often a bias in favor of someone else versus a bias against someone.

So what?

The reality is everyone has unconscious biases that influence daily decisions. By choosing favorites, leaders are providing an advantage to some and unintentionally disfavoring others. A manager may be biased in favor of the associate who is the most visible, who completed the last golf foursome or attended the latest happy hour. Typically, one favors those of similar backgrounds with shared experiences, culture and associations. It’s a bias that historically has excluded women and people of color.

A critical way for leaders and managers to overcome these unconscious biases is through mentoring and sponsorship programs. The impact of sponsorship on career advancement has become readily apparent, whether it’s assigning a new case, project or client or choosing whom to promote.

“The reality is that without sponsors, women and diverse lawyers are more likely to be compensated at a lower level and less likely to receive developmentally rich career opportunities or be promoted at the same rate as white men,” says Arin Reeves of the MCCA Leadership Institute.

Therefore, connecting the dots between building a diverse talent pipeline and recruiting diverse employees is vital. The key to sustainable improvement is engagement and retention. These new, talented employees join the workforce eager to contribute. But without support and guidance — implemented through effective onboarding processes and authentic mentoring relationships — they will simply disengage and go elsewhere.

The gap between commitment to change and actual change is most often caused by unconscious bias. Sponsored relationships need to be cultivated. If you are an incoming employee and, in particular, a woman or person of color, invest time and energy seeking feedback on your performance and strive to improve core competencies. Learning how to navigate corporate and organizational politics is essential to career advancement.

Also, develop a career plan. After all, we plan everything from our vacations to our retirement — why not our career path? Write it down! A written career development plan is a great conversation tool to strategize with mentors and sponsors as well as organizational leaders. Leverage your plan to get folks invested in your success.

Besides being the “right thing” to do, making a commitment to workplace diversity is simply recognizing demographic reality. According to the 2012 U.S. Chamber Small Business Study, businesses owned by African Americans, Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans have grown 523 percent, 545 percent and 696 percent, respectively, from 1982 to 2007. Businesses owned by caucasians only grew by 81 percent.

By 2050, today’s minorities collectively will be the majority.

The burgeoning minority want to deal with service providers who understand them. Employers, if this is not enough motivation for you, the simple fact is that innovation and problem-solving improves when teams include diverse perspectives.

Yes, we all have the right intentions, yet the results remain unchanged. Isn’t this the definition of insanity — expecting different results without changing our behavior? To have a real impact on employee engagement and retention, diversity and inclusion efforts need to be authentic and sustained.

To paraphrase author Arin Reeves, the fundamental challenges of unconscious biases need to be countered and interrupted. Since unconscious biases are often deeply ingrained, leaders must make conscious efforts to not only recognize them, but also to support people who think and behave differently. Leaders need to actively expand their own professional networks to include diverse individuals who can help broaden their perspective.

To conclude, let’s avoid insanity and begin to change our modus operandi when it comes to talent management. If you’re a manager, track your biases, push yourself out of your comfort zone and cultivate relationships that will broaden your perspectives. Support effective mentoring programs, with adequate resources, that develop into sponsored relationships.

These sponsorship programs need to address the impact of unconscious bias on assignments, performance evaluations, recruiting and retention and promotions. Remember to establish metrics to measure the effectiveness of your programs. And, most important, tie all of these efforts to compensation. After all, change arrives when there is a strong motivation.

Till next time.

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