

Is Your Organization Ready to Explore



# UNCONSCIOUS BIAS?



Ten Strategies to Support your Unconscious Bias Initiative's ROI

by Leslie Traub, Chief Consulting Officer, Cook Ross Inc.



# Introduction

---

## **Unconscious bias. Implicit bias. Unconscious preferences. Blind spots.**

Whatever we call it, in the worlds of diversity, leadership development, and talent management, this topic is HOT, HOT, HOT. There are a lot of reasons for this enthusiasm.

The renewed awareness of unconscious bias has reenergized a somewhat tired diversity conversation. Many people who care about and are invested in the promise of diversity and inclusion have been frustrated with the results of their diversity efforts: great statements and intentions from CEOs and executive diversity councils, organizational websites that make promises of multi-cultural, multi-generational workforces, and gay pride, black history, and women's history months. Even together, these aren't enough to prove that the progress made reflects all of the good intentions and hard work that so many organizations have invested.

Enter unconscious bias: evidentiary, new, exciting, and being written about in the Wall Street Journal, the Financial Times, The New York Times, Scientific American, and many academic journals. Talent Management Global VPs are starting to pay attention to the world of inclusion and diversity. The possibility of an approach that provides an alternative to maligning white, heterosexual, Christian men, while reducing shame and guilt shows promise in terms of people's willingness to engage.

But is it enough to deliver the kind of transformational results that most diversity, inclusion, and talent professionals hope for?

We at Cook Ross have been providing various kinds of education on unconscious bias for some time, long before it became the new "it" thing. We have provided workshops, eLearning, and web seminars for thousands of leaders, people managers and individual contributors throughout the world. In our experience, the best results come from pairing a robust educational program on unconscious bias with a thoughtfully articulated diversity strategy that integrates bias mitigation into the core of business.

Creating widespread understanding of bias, including its impact on our decision-making, strategic thinking, and business results, is foundational to creating a culture of inclusion, but organization-wide education can be a resource intensive prospect. Thinking about your education effort as a piece of your change management strategy will carry your investment much further.

We have identified certain criteria which enhance the ability of the work to transform the diversity and inclusion conversation into business results.

*In this article, we offer ten such strategies that can support the ROI from your unconscious bias education initiative.*

# Strategies

## 1 Ensure organizational readiness through strategic communications and stake-holder identification.

People need to know why the organization is making the investment, and what makes the topic important both to the leadership and to the organization's strategic direction. Key spokespeople from the business need to visibly sponsor the effort, and make it clear that this is not "diversity training as usual," but a sustained commitment that all employees have a role in, regardless of position or level.

Exploring bias requires truth-telling: to oneself, and to the organization. It demands both greater authenticity and greater vulnerability. Leaders must fully understand what is expected of them in terms of reinforcing the learning, modeling this behavior, and being particularly rigorous in visibly monitoring their own decision making.

### Key Steps:

- Identify sponsors and stakeholders. Ensure that they come from the business, and are not exclusively D&I or HR executives.
- Look for the most influential people in the organization. Even if they are the biggest naysayers, gently educate and influence them to be spokespeople.
- Craft key messages to share with sponsors, especially explaining why this new approach offers promise.
- Encourage stakeholders to find their own stories that demonstrate when unconscious bias has impacted their decision making in a way not consistent with their intentions.



## 2 Change the conversation of leadership.

After education and awareness, support leaders in thinking about how to make the learning actionable. Others will look to them to model a greater awareness about their own biases. How they speak about it, and *that* they speak about it, will call others to action.

### Key Steps:

- In addition to talking mission, financials, risk, talent, and strategy, add a question or topic on bias to the regular meeting agenda of the CEO and his or her team.
- Potential questions could include:
  - ⇒ Since we last met, what is the one thing regarding bias that you have done or have seen?
  - ⇒ How is bias showing up in our team?
  - ⇒ How is it showing up in how we're thinking about succession management?
  - ⇒ Talent?
  - ⇒ Do we already know who we're promoting to key leadership positions? Who might we have missed?
- The executive leadership team needs to hold their direct reports accountable for having the same conversations regularly, and so on throughout the organization.
- Encourage social learning. Have leaders share their insights openly as a way to stimulate others to do same.



### 3 Provide “just –in-time” education during the Talent Management cycle to remind managers about the impact of bias on key talent decisions.

People in organizations are busy and can have very short attention spans. Although awareness education can be very impactful, the long term benefit and application of learning about bias without reminders is unlikely. Consider coupling internal communications about hiring, performance management, talent reviews, and nominating high potentials with critical learnings about bias in order to remind decision-makers on its impact on talent development. This will serve to put the notion of bias squarely in the forefront of the brain just in time for them to make a more conscious and more objective decision.

#### Key Steps:

- Partner with the process owners of your talent management systems to identify significant moments that should be highlighted as reminders for people managers.
- Work together collaboratively to insert key messages into existing communications.
- Avoid being too generic in your messaging. For the greatest impact, authentically identify the negative impact that bias can have on talent management decisions.
- Use Performance Support Tools that summarize critical learnings on the relationship of unconscious bias to decisions in the talent management process.
- Develop simple job aids to help managers think through important talent decisions.

### 4 Weave the conversation about unconscious bias through all management and leadership development endeavors.

Leadership development programs offer a significant opportunity for reinforcing and teaching behaviors and competencies in any organization, including unconscious bias. Consider including best practices for managers and leaders to approach bias mitigation at different levels of the organization.

#### Key Steps:

- Examine the organization’s leadership development curricula. Identify where content on unconscious bias, and self-reflection on background, biases, and filters can be integrated at different levels.
- Think broadly, because biases and assumptions exist in every decision we make.
- Beyond talent management, potential areas to integrate could include influencing skills, decision-making, strategic thinking, and project management.
- Educate on core bias content by management level. Introduce content in comprehensive blocks from the supervisory level up to the executive level.
- Ensure that your leadership competency model includes mitigating bias as a core competency. All of the competencies should be broad enough that they cover globally inclusive and gender inclusive leadership styles (see #6 below).





*Even when we are careful to be inclusive in our language, there may be an institutional tendency to value behaviors that are listed first on the competency model, are the most developed historically, or are taught in leadership development programs.*

## 5 Establish meaningful metrics that support the organization's goals.

Determine precisely what bias education is intended to improve. Is it to bring in a more diverse class through hiring? Increase diversity in the pipeline? Retain women at the top of the organization? Regardless of the intention, ensure that you are acquiring appropriate and accurate metrics. Do not ignore who is hired — it is a good place to start. But to move beyond this, take into account every other decision that contributes to diverse pipelines. This might include: percentages of women and other underrepresented groups promoted, who are in high potential programs, and/or receiving key visibility assignments.

### Key Steps:

- Determine what changes you are looking for, and identify appropriate metrics for them. Consider what is realistic for your organization, keeping in mind historical trends and available talent within your organization and industry.
- Before they become KPIs (key performance indicators), ensure that they are strenuously reviewed and discussed.
- Ensure that you are selecting the right measures.
  - ⇒ **For example:** To increase the number of women at the top of the organization, the metric for the first year might be to ensure that a certain percentage of high potentials are women, and after that, you may aim to increase the percentage of women in the succession plan.

## 6 Examine the organization's competency model to ensure mitigating bias behaviors are identified.

Competency models tend to reflect our existing or historic leaders. Many are built on an historic and outdated model of the “strong man” leader, and might reflect behaviors such as being decisive, strategic, productive, and execution oriented. Even when we are careful to be inclusive in our language, there may be an institutional tendency to value behaviors that are listed first on the competency model, are the most developed historically, or are taught in leadership development programs. It behooves us to actively explore the nuance and bias in both the competencies and how we deploy them. In doing so, we ensure alignment between goals and action.

### Key Steps:

- Review the research that Catalyst conducted on gender bias in competency models (*Cascading Gender Biases, Compound Effects*, 2009).
- Test for competencies that reflect both dominant and non-dominant leadership styles, and ensure that education balances both.
  - ⇒ **For example:** As a rule, most organizational leaders need more support and education on the feminine aspects of leadership (collaboration, engagement, visionary) given how much value has been placed on the masculine (see above). Both are critical for organizational success.

## 7 Build a protocol for leading succession management.

Many organizations launch unconscious bias education and expect to increase the number of women or people of color at the top of their organizations. While this is not an unreasonable expectation, examining the process of succession management in addition to educating its users is likely to have the most substantial impact.

Bias is present anytime a group of leaders gathers to discuss talent and make decisions about the organization's future. In addition to biases about the candidates themselves, dynamics that impact decision-making include power and status differentials, groupthink, and lack of constructive conflict. All of this diminishes the dissenting voice. By increasing the diversity of the group and creating an environment of trust, these negative dynamics can be diminished.

### Key Steps:

- Assemble a diverse group of leaders, especially by tenure.
- Prime the group with a reminder of the business strategy and the competencies needed to move towards organizational goals.
- Begin the meeting with a verbal, stated commitment to equity and fairness. Acknowledge the potential danger of bias.
- Establish norms beforehand. Remember to address how hierarchy shapes decision-making.
- Consider asking someone to play a process role to ensure that all voices are heard, and no single individual dominates the conversation.
- Distribute bias “capture” worksheets to everyone on the call or meeting, and walk through how to use them. Where appropriate, encourage members to be transparent about their biases and the contexts through which they know the candidates.
- Be aware of how “readiness” is defined for each individual, as well as the adjectives used to describe strengths and weaknesses. Are there differences between those in dominant and non-dominant groups?

*Groupthink, deference to authority, lack of constructive conflict, and a tyranny of the majority can all suppress the dissenting voice.*



## 8 Ensure that leaders recognize how to invite and value the dissenting voice.

The core value of diversity is to bring different perspectives into the organization. Research shows that diverse groups make better decisions, but only when these perspectives can be freely expressed.

### Key Steps:

- Solicit broad input for decision-making.
- Consciously encourage and invite the dissenting view. Pulling information from a diverse group, and discussing it fully, will further increase objectivity.
- Be mindful of whose input you automatically listen to, and who you automatically discount, regardless of the content.
- Prior to a decision conversation, remind the team of the importance of challenging their assumptions, and being mindful of patterned thinking.
- Analyze the decision pattern on your team.
  - ⇒ Do you speak first?
  - ⇒ Who does not speak?
  - ⇒ How does the meeting process change the nature of the dialogue?



## 9 Consider job assignment one of the most important aspects of leadership development.

Job assignments are one of the most important predictors of organizational success. Most leaders have “go-to” people who occur instantaneously in the mind when a job assignment becomes available. Questioning this pattern can generate new consciousness in the job assignment process.

### Key Steps:

- Who comes to mind immediately when you have a strategic assignment?
- Challenge your thinking. Explore who else could benefit from the opportunity, and potentially bring you and your organization a new perspective.
- Offer feedback to leadership when you see visible opportunities offered to the same people time and again.
- Review the selection criteria for assignments, and consider if those criteria are based on leadership styles, qualities, and thinking shared by the existing leadership team.

## 10 Provide education across the organization so that everyone shares the same distinctions.

The more people in the organization share an understanding of bias, the richer the base for dialogue and change. At a minimum, all people managers and human resources staff in the organization should be exposed to the information. This will create the opportunity to impact HR structures and systems, as well as the full breadth of the talent pipeline.

### Key Steps:

- Provide HR professionals with a base of awareness about unconscious bias.
- Offer targeted workshops for particular focus areas, including recruitment, learning and development, and performance management, which center on identifying key decisions made in those roles and how bias might impact the outcome. Create an opportunity for dialogue around how they can generate personal and systemic change.
- Ensure that education for supervisors touches on all human decisions within their control, and provide opportunities to identify personal biases and their potential impact.
- When working with leaders who participate in succession management, review strategies for neutral group decision-making (see #7).

## Conclusion

---

Our experience with clients from many different industries all over the world demonstrates that strategic implementation of unconscious bias education offers the promise of real transformation in both diversity and inclusion and conscious leadership in general. Being thoughtful in how you design your unconscious bias education strategy will have a significant impact on your culture, and your business results.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Leslie Traub is a respected national leader in the field of diversity, inclusion, and change management. With more than 25 years of experience, Leslie creates sustainable systems of change that yield greater performance, profit, and possibility. She specializes in customizing and facilitating training programs, executive-level coaching, and organization-wide change and team development. Since joining Cook Ross in 1994, Leslie has developed an international reputation for leading systems based change in shifting an organization's lenses and practices on diverse talent, especially for women. She leads major engagements with financial and professional services, legal, energy, scientific organizations, and numerous federal agencies.

## ABOUT COOK ROSS INC.

Cook Ross has over twenty four years of experience in providing an innovative approach to diversity, inclusion, cultural competency, and leadership development through training and consulting products and services. Cook Ross is considered to be a thought leader in the practical application of academic research of the unconscious to organizational diversity & inclusion efforts. For more information, contact us at [lookingforanswers@cookross.com](mailto:lookingforanswers@cookross.com).



(301) 565-4035 phone

(301) 565-3952 fax

[www.cookross.com](http://www.cookross.com)

[lookingforanswers@cookross.com](mailto:lookingforanswers@cookross.com)