Does Unconscious Bias Training Work?

Four Intervention Strategies that Can Help Create More Consciously Inclusive Organizations

by Howard Ross, Founder and Chief Learning Officer, Cook Ross Inc.
Much has been written about unconscious bias training, especially regarding the question of whether or not such training has the ability to impact organizational performance. This is a vitally important inquiry, because the time and cost associated with training programs are great enough to warrant close examination of the results that they produce. As with many initiatives, there are a variety of ways in which unconscious bias training can be conducted, and results often depend on the approach taken.

At Cook Ross, we have been studying the research about unconscious bias for more than 15 years and actively working with clients in hundreds of companies all over the world for more than 12. Our study and expertise have resulted in significant, measurable success for our clients. The Cook Ross framework, which has four areas of focus, is an intervention strategy that is designed to impact the entire organization. This model was developed not solely on the basis of our diversity and inclusion work, but also from our staff members’ collective backgrounds in organizational culture development and system change. The purpose of this paper is not to establish the case for the importance of unconscious bias work, as we have done in previous thought papers, but rather to focus on a fundamental question: Is there a way to impact bias within organizations?

The following four areas of focus represent interventions that can mitigate the impact of unconscious bias:

- Education
- Priming
- Structures and Systems
- Accountability

We explore these areas in this paper.
When diversity consulting and education first became “mainstream” in corporate America more than 30 years ago, such programs were often conducted with a heavy-handed approach. While well-intentioned, trainers typically engaged people in exercises that were ineffective or, worse, produced results that were the opposite of those desired. Over the past 15 years, we have studied the research on what makes diversity training work and not work and discovered key findings.

By emphasizing differences, traditional diversity training has often been found to increase tension between groups. One way that it does this is by focusing exclusively on the real-life experiences of people from different identities and backgrounds. These experiences are important to understand because they fundamentally shape the way that individuals interpret and respond to the world. However, the problem, as neurocognitive research shows, is that the more one emphasizes differences between people (especially along racial lines), the less our brains produce mirror neurons, which are essential for empathy. The tension created by exercises with an underlying theme of “them vs. us” can result in backlash once participants are outside of the social environment of the training. In fact, some of the messages that are delivered can be seen as negative, activating unhealthy biases about the very groups of people of which the training is attempting to engender better understanding.

In addition, many diversity training courses have been designed to induce guilt among members of the dominant group, such as men, whites, Christians, and heterosexuals. The problem is that guilt, which can be a motivator to change when used in limited quantities, may in excess actually become a contracting emotional response that causes people to withdraw rather than engage.

Given those pitfalls, is it true to say that “Diversity training doesn’t work” or “Unconscious bias training doesn’t work”? The problem with both of these statements is that they assume that all diversity training or unconscious bias training courses are the same. In fact, when done the right way, unconscious bias training can be an important part of a culture-based, systemic process of developing more inclusive cultures.

Recognizing that training will almost never have lasting impact as a standalone intervention, good unconscious bias training can still do many things. It can help people better understand that there are factors in their decision-making of which they are not aware. By expanding awareness, it can make people become more willing to engage in other activities that support change. It can contribute to setting or changing the tone with which people engage in the subject, and it can impart core concepts.

However, almost none of this will produce lasting impact if it is the only activity in which the organization engages to reinforce these aims. There may be a small percentage of people
who will change their behavior, but generally, when training is handled as a one-off activity, participants will return to their previous behavior rather quickly.

So, what are the qualities that tend to make training more effective? Cook Ross has distinguished eight factors that contribute to training that works.

1. **Emphasize that bias is fundamental to the way human beings process the world.**

   We cannot function without bias. It is essential to our survival. We tend to think of bias as only negative, but when it gives us the ability to react quickly and defensively in a dangerous situation, it can be life-saving. The key is to become aware of which biases serve us and which are damaging. When we see bias as only “bad” or “wrong,” it runs counter to how most people think about themselves. It causes us to be in denial, or drive the bias back into our unconscious minds.

   The opportunity in effective training is to normalize rather than demonize bias. If we recognize that we may not be able to erase bias, we can instead learn to navigate it and mitigate its impact through greater conscious awareness. This is not unusual for human beings. Most of us have some element of our lives that we have learned to manage or control. Perhaps you have a tendency to talk too much, or to react in certain ways. You probably have tried to manage those reactions by being more aware of them and consciously developing new behaviors. Though they do not totally disappear, their frequency and impact are limited.

   When we see bias as purely “bad” and attempt to eliminate it, all too often we actually drive it more into the unconscious. We can deal with negative biases most effectively when we take responsibility for them rather than feeling guilty.

2. **Be evidence-based.**

   Diversity educators have developed a sometimes well-earned reputation for saying things because we hope that they are true, or believe they should be true, rather than because we can prove that they’re true. It is our duty to be sure that we use solid research and data to build our case. There have been more than 1,000 studies in the past ten years alone on the impact of unconscious bias, conducted in the best academic institutions by some of the smartest social scientists and neuroscientists in the world. This data unquestionably establishes how bias occurs and why. Effective bias training builds on a solid foundation of research, not political correctness or ideology.

3. **Speak to common ground rather than differences.**

   As noted earlier in this paper, research from all around the world shows that people are less likely to feel empathy the more their differences are accentuated. Training courses that emphasize differences between people will almost always produce a righteousness or guilt response, forcing people into a “them vs. us” mindset that inhibits the sustainability of the diversity effort and may ultimately undermine it.

   Trainers should still be willing to talk about the different life experiences and challenges that people face, but do it in the context of understanding that all humans are the product of their life experiences
and generally process those experiences in similar ways. The common ground is that all people have bias of some kind. The net result of this is the realization that if “I grew up in your story, and you grew up in mine,” we would probably see the world like each other do. By helping people understand that concept, we can more easily motivate them to try to understand each other rather than revert to judgment or feeling guilty.

4. Provide an understanding of the human mind and how we think.

Over the past ten years, humans have learned more about how the brain works than we have known in all of history up until now. These new insights have proven to be immensely valuable in helping people gain better understanding of human decision-making at all levels.

It turns out that an awareness of these insights can also have a huge impact on making unconscious bias education more impactful. Social psychologists Gordon Moskowitz of Lehigh University and Jeff Stone from the University of Arizona study the impact of bias on medical decision-making, an issue that contributes greatly to the continuing patterns of health disparities that negatively affect African-Americans and other blacks, as well as Latinos, Native Americans, women, and the LGBT community. “Workshops or other learning modules that help medical professionals learn about non-conscious processes can provide them with skills that reduce bias when they interact with minority group patients,” said Moskowitz and Stone. “Examples of such skills in action include automatically activating egalitarian goals, looking for common identities and counter-stereotypical information, and taking the perspective of the minority group patient.”

Gaining a basic understanding of how we think and how the brain processes decisions helps people learn to watch their own decision-making in a non-defensive way. Most people want to think of themselves as fair, particularly in a business environment. When we realize that our minds may unconsciously lead us in directions other than what we intend, that knowledge can combine with our natural tendency to self-correct. The neuro-cognitive scientific aspect of this can be especially helpful for organizations that have a heavy contingent of analytical, left-brain thinkers. We have found, for example, that this perspective can be especially helpful in our work with thousands of people in medical schools, other academic institutions, financial institutions, and technology companies. It once again helps bring a healthy “depersonalization” to the conversation.

5. Create experiential learning...don’t just talk about it!

Another key to learning is the importance of experiential exercises rather than simply a transfer of information. Information is helpful, as is being given suggestions for new behaviors to engage in, but on its own, information may not be enough to empower people to consistently apply a new approach. Many people who consistently struggle with their weight, for example, know what they should and shouldn’t eat, and that they should exercise, and yet they don’t do it. Years ago when I started my professional career as a teacher right out of college, my mentor, 

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Nancy Neall, told me, “If you want a child to know what a rabbit is, show them a picture. They will understand even better if you show them a real rabbit. But if you want them to really get it, put one in their lap.”

We accomplish this goal through various means: simulation exercises that demonstrate bias occurring right before viewers’ eyes, cognitive exercises that allow participants to experience various ways the mind makes decisions, case studies that call them to apply the learning to “real-life scenarios,” or personal exploration that helps people better understand their own perceptual lens. The more experiential, the deeper and more sustained the learning.

6. Make it relevant and applicable to their world.

In order for people to apply the learning to the everyday world they live in, we have to make their education as relevant as possible to their everyday experience. As educators, this involves doing our homework: identifying patterns of behavior within the particular industry or subject matter they are focused on, learning about the history of the particular organization, building a strong business case for developing more consciously inclusive behaviors as a way to help the organization meet its goals, and sharing relevant data and studies that apply to the particular industry or field.

The more that training resonates with participants’ personal and professional experience, the more “sticking power” it will have.

7. Shift awareness and behavior!

There are two fundamental objectives in effective unconscious bias training. The first, as we discussed earlier, is helping people gain awareness of the fact that unconscious bias exists and is impacting us all the time. This insight can be transformative because, if communicated effectively, it reshapes the way people see their world.

The second is behavioral: Developing specific behaviors that they can put in place that will give them a way to apply the learning directly. One method of doing this is to have people develop “if/then statements” that operationalize the concepts. For example, statements such as the following are very behavioral, and make it easier for people to directly apply their learning at the first moment they encounter these situations in the workplace.

- If a recruit asks you “how many people like me are there in the firm?” then tell them the truth, what you are doing about it, and how they can play a part.
- If you have more introverted people in the room, then occasionally poll to be sure their voices are included.
- If you are putting together a team, then be sure it represents a broad diversity of identity and thinking.
- If you are launching something into the marketplace, then have people from different identity groups review it.

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4 Special thanks to the Neuro-Leadership Institute for piloting this approach.
8. Focus both individually and collectively.

The final element is the recognition that we have to focus both individually and collectively if we are going to create sustained change.

Individual change is important, yet most of us have experienced how difficult it is to sustain new behaviors when we go back into an environment in which everybody else is engaging in the same old behaviors. Human beings are social animals. We are deeply impacted by the normative behavior of people in the cultures with which we identify. In fact, the need to belong may be our most basic human need. Despite Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, human beings often prioritize belonging above some of our basic physiological needs. In collectivist cultures, there are many examples of people sacrificing their individual needs to ensure their acceptance and belonging in the group.

Some current researchers have gone so far as to take this question into the study of brain functioning. By studying brain imaging in test subjects who were participating in social activities and then excluded, the researchers found that social exclusion triggers activity in the same region of the brain associated with physical pain. We want to fit in with people around us, and, in doing so, feel like we belong to the group. Human history has given us example after example of times when mass hysteria led huge numbers of people to “normalize” behavior that, from an outside perspective, is clearly abhorrent: slavery, the Holocaust, genocide against Native American peoples, the Rwandan genocide, and so on. We also know that collective peer influence can also lead positive behavior to spread, as when millions of Americans contributed money to the Haitian earthquake relief fund, even in the midst of a major economic crisis, because it became “the right thing to do.”

Organizations have that power as well. Strong organizational cultures can both consciously and unconsciously create normative behavior that is either positive or negative. Those patterns establish “the way things are done around here” and become the path for fitting in and being successful in the organization. People’s behavior will tend to mold to those patterns. But how can we create them?

Now that we have identified some elements of effective training, let’s explore the other kinds of interventions that help the training stick.

PRIMING

Once people have completed an effective training program, the work actually begins. We often say that completing the training is like joining the gym; it gets the process of changing the culture of the organization started, but, like the gym membership, without a commitment to a regular pattern of behavior, nothing will fundamentally change.

The first element of this “exercise routine” is priming. Priming is the implicit tendency to

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respond to something based on expectations created by a previous experience or association. It can occur explicitly or implicitly. Anybody reading this has probably been “primed” by a television commercial, for example. You are watching a show, a pizza commercial comes on, and then not long after, when somebody asks you what you want for dinner, pizza sounds delicious!

Priming can also be implicit. For example, look at these six pictures:

Now, what word do you think of?

SO_P

My guess is that you probably said “soap.” It could, of course, have been “soup,” but looking at all of the pictures associated with personal hygiene, “soap” was probably the word that came to mind.

There have been numerous studies about priming. Researchers Melissa Bateson, Daniel Nettle, and Gilbert Roberts at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne in Great Britain put signs on the walls of break rooms in companies that asked people to pay for their coffee, tea, and snacks on the “honor system.” Some of the instructions had a picture of flowers on them while others had pictures of a pair of eyes staring, but all of them were simply pieces of paper taped to the wall. It turned out that people were dramatically more likely to be honest and pay for what they took when the eyes, rather than the flowers, were pictured, even though they were simply images on the wall!⁷

Priming is a critically important part of the process of behavioral sustainability because it can be used to remind people to apply their learning at the appropriate time. For example, imagine that you participate in an unconscious bias training and really agree with it and want to apply what you’ve learned. Yet, the next time you have to do a performance review is in three to four months. How likely is it that, when conducting the review, you will remember what you have learned? Not likely, unless, just before you are about to do the review, you are reminded of a few things to keep in mind. Your likelihood of recalling and applying the key points of the prior unconscious bias training would then exponentially increase.

We have identified a number of ways, including the following, to use priming techniques to trigger more mindful behaviors.

Performance Support Tools

There are several different kinds of performance support tools that can be helpful in real time to remind people to be more attentive to biases that might impact their behavior. Some are writing exercises that simply ask a series of questions around triggers that might impact a decision.

For example, if you are about to review a résumé to determine whether or not to interview someone, you might be asked to quickly answer the following set of questions:

- Does the résumé remind you of anyone? Is that a positive or negative memory?
- Is there anything that you strongly react to on the résumé? Is it relevant to the job at hand? (For example, as a professional musician myself, I once felt more positive about a candidate who attended the Berklee College of Music, even though the job he was interviewing for had nothing to do with music!)
- Are there similarities between the candidate’s experience and your own?

⁷ https://www.staff.ncl.ac.uk/daniel.nettle/ernestjonesnettlebateson.pdf
Other support tools are short videos, no more than two minutes in length, that provide reminders of certain things to keep in mind. For instance, Cook Ross has developed tools provided on a smartphone application that apply to ten different stages of the talent management process. Before going into an interview, a manager can spend two minutes watching a video that reminds him or her that bias is an everyday occurrence and that there are several things to watch out for. Reminders could include:

- Measure current performance.
- Be aware of being influenced by undocumented stories.
- Don’t let past performance impact current issues.
- Be careful not to be unduly influenced by the profile of assignments.
- Watch for patterns in your evaluation history.
- Be careful not to criticize people just because they have done things differently than you did, as long as they were able to produce results.
- Measure against success, not personal standards.
- Get broad input and explore contrary viewpoints.
- Avoid groupthink.

Just taking a few minutes to be reminded of these things makes people far more likely to apply the lessons they have learned previously in training.

**Nudging**

Another tool that can be helpful is “nudging.” Nudging is a phenomenon that is often associated with behavioral economics. Nudges are behavioral prods that encourage people to behave in certain ways, often without them even realizing that they are being encouraged.

One classic example of a “nudge” is in organ donation. Today, most Western countries conduct organ donations in similar ways. People are asked when they get their driver’s license to sign up to donate their organs. A few years ago, researchers decided to evaluate what the patterns of donations were across Europe. What they found was quite fascinating. Some countries had a huge percentage of citizens agreeing to donate their organs: Austria (99.98%), Belgium (98%), France (99.91%), Hungary (99.99%), Poland (99.64%), and Sweden (85.9%). On the other hand, several of the countries had decidedly lower responses: Denmark (4.25%), Netherlands (27.5%), United Kingdom (17.17%), and Germany (12%). Why the difference? Was this kind of altruism more naturally occurring in certain cultures? Not likely. After all, Germany and Austria may have some differences culturally, but certainly not enough to warrant the difference between the levels of participation in the donor program.

It turns out that it had nothing to do with culture or even altruism. The difference lies in a very simple nudge: asking the question in a different way. In the case of the higher participating countries, people were told to opt out if they did not want to donate their organs, otherwise the assumption was that they would donate. On the other hand, in the countries with low participation, people were told to check a box if they did want to donate their organs. This simple nudge made all the difference in the world.

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One example of how these nudges can be used in regard to diversity and inclusion-related issues is in “blind résumé” evaluation. One of the major inspirations for this approach has been the changes in methods of auditioning musicians for symphony orchestras. In 1970, only 5% of the musicians in the orchestras of the world were women. By 1980, the figure had only risen to 12%. Then, orchestras started to use a number of methods to increase the odds of women making the orchestra. One of the most important were so-called “blind auditions.” Instead of walking out on stage, musicians were asked to walk out on a rug and behind a screen so that the raters could not see them or even hear their shoes, in order to prevent the noise from high heels being noticeable. The impact has been dramatic: Over the past 30 years the number of women in orchestras has practically tripled! (The method also led to the idea for the hit television show The Voice.)

How does this apply to hiring in businesses? Multiple studies all around the world have shown that names of applicants on résumés can bias hiring based on race, gender, or ethnicity. Removing identifying details from all résumés for first screenings can help eliminate biases in the early stages of a hiring process when people are making very fast decisions to winnow down a résumé pool. Some companies have even created technology solutions that can support this.

Two of our colleagues, Tinna Nielsen and Lisa Kepinski, have done work in researching and identifying nudges that can encourage people to behave more inclusively. Some examples of the ones they have identified include:

- Have at least one interview panelist participate by phone to see if the physical appearance of the candidate is a factor in the decision. For example, some historians believe that the reason John F. Kennedy won the first televised presidential debates over Richard Nixon was because he looked better on television, rather than because he answered the questions better!

- Set hiring goals based on dominant group numbers rather than by targets for the non-dominant, “minority” group hiring. People often bristle at the notion of “quotas” regarding inclusion of underrepresented minorities. So instead of having a diversity goal of “30% women,” flip the goal to be “no more than 70% of either gender.”

- Think carefully about how the questions you ask may “nudge” a particular response. For example, with internal talent profiles that employees complete for themselves, change the question wording from “Are you interested in an international assignment?” to “Would you consider an international assignment at some point in the future?” A parent with young children may say “no” to the first question, because of timing, and one might mistakenly think that they will never be interested.

Sophisticated nudging can shape behavior in fascinating ways.

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9 To learn more about this, check out Everyday Bias, page 120.
11 Nielsen, Tinna C., Kepinski, Lisa, Inclusion Nudges Guidebook, available as eBook online at http://inclusion-nudges.org/get-the-guidebook/
Physical Environment

As we saw earlier with the soap/soup experiment, we can be subliminally influenced by cues in our environment. A consortium of researchers\(^\text{12}\) studied bias reduction techniques around the world and came to the conclusion that the most effective way to reduce bias may be to expose people to “counter-stereotypical exemplars” from groups with associated negative biases. Pictures on the walls, stories about people’s accomplishments, and other evidence all help to give the brain alternative ways to think about groups who may have absorbed negative biases. Activities like Black History Month or gay pride celebrations can also do the same, though it is far more impactful if these nudges are part of people’s everyday experience. Take a look at your own environment. Whose pictures are on the walls?

All of these priming techniques can create an environment that unconsciously reduces some of the negative impact of stereotypes and biases in the culture of an organization.

STRUCTURES AND SYSTEMS

One of our mantras is that structure creates behavior in organizational cultures. The way we structure our processes can dramatically impact the results we get. In addition, structured processes can instigate behavior. Cook Ross has extensively studied ways to impact organizational structures and systems.\(^\text{13}\) When we build alternative ways to structure some of our basic systems, especially for making people-related decisions, we can dramatically impact how conscious people are in how they are making those decisions and, frequently, how those decisions impact individuals from different groups.

We tend to look at the primary talent management systems, though there are certainly others:

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\(^{13}\) Everyday Bias includes an appendix with over 15 pages of suggestions in the various different parts of the talent management cycle.
Once we start looking at each of these processes, there are ways that we can redesign or modify processes to make them more bias-resistant. For example:  

Recruitment

- Check anchoring biases regarding particular schools or other aspects of résumés. The challenge with relying too heavily on the school a candidate attended is that there can be extenuating factors (such as financial status, geographical location, family support needs, etc.) beyond competence that determine school selection.

Sourcing

- If you use executive search firms and other similar resources, be sure to monitor their practices. One of the most challenging aspects of working with resources such as these is that they may have a particular kind of “ideal” candidate that they seek and promote and their own internal biases can eliminate talent before you ever get a chance to see it yourself. They also may not be subject to many fair hiring laws and guidelines.

Interviewing

- Give job candidates the questions they will be asked a few days before an interview, which can help balance out biases that unfairly impact introverts or extroverts, or people for whom English is not their first language.

- Be aware of the circumstances in which an interview is taking place. If you, for example, interview one person at 9:00 AM in the office, a second at noon in the cafeteria, and a third over Skype, you are not conducting the same interviews!

- Use diverse panels for interviewing so that you can get a sense of how the candidate is interpreted by different kinds of people on your team. A diverse panel can reveal subtleties in the way candidates respond to different people.

Hiring

- Watch for biases in the organization’s reaction to the person or people who recommend a candidate or provide references. This is not to say that references should be ignored. However, if we are not careful, these can be instances where the bias of another individual influences our own decision.

- Establish a clear decision-making criteria so that anybody who is part of the hiring process understands what “we” are looking for and can avoid having their personal opinions dominate the decision.

Onboarding

- Assume that the more different people are from the dominant environment, the more specialized attention you may need to pay to observe how they are integrating into the culture. Avoid making premature assumptions about the person’s performance. People who are familiar with a culture like the one in your organization may get up to speed faster, but still not be the best long-term employee.

- Be systematic rather than intuitive when giving initial assignments and job opportunities. Often a new hire gets to show off their abilities early simply because of circumstances or because

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14 From Everyday Bias.
somebody takes a liking to the person. This can leave another potential talent waiting for the chance to show what they can do. If you are tracking the projects that people are put on, you can monitor this behavior.

**Mentoring and Sponsorship**

- Watch for patterns of job assignments and stretch assignments between both individuals and groups. Research has shown that one way biases can unconsciously play out in organizations is through opportunities where employees get to show what they can do. If one employee gets two chances to perform and another gets five or six, the latter one will clearly have an advantage in proving his or her value. More often than not, young white male employees get more stretch assignments than either white women or men and women of color. White men are often rewarded for potential, whereas individuals in other demographics are rewarded for performance. This kind of inequity can increase the disparity of development.

**Performance Review**

- Check established metrics to balance gut reactions. Be sure that what gets measured is actually indicative of performance. Imagine, for example, that a sales team is being held accountable for only their financial results. How can you know that one person didn’t benefit from an easy opportunity that came to the company, while another did an incredible job to almost get a different sale that didn’t work out? This can be an area where primacy bias and recency bias can often play major roles.
- Explore developmental and conversational alternatives to rated, “report card” style assessments which tend to focus on the past.

**Calibration**

- Begin calibration meetings with a stated commitment to equity and inclusion and create meeting structures and processes that ensure inclusion of all participants in the meeting.
- Establish a shared understanding of the relative weight of various metrics that are being calibrated.
- Question expectations that seem to favor dominant over non-dominant behaviors (for example, masculine over feminine leadership styles).

**Recognizing Talent**

- Watch how culture or personality may affect how employees engage in “face-time” opportunities. A few years ago, Cook Ross conducted a development program for the top women leaders in a global organization. The women spent a year together in the program and during the last session, a group of all-male senior leaders came to interact with the participants. Each of the leaders sat with five or six of the women and discussed the state of the company. I was observing one of the groups and noticed that one of the women, a Korean, wasn’t saying anything. After quite a while, I asked her if she had anything to add.
She then provided a series of statements and questions that were the sharpest of the meeting. If she had not been directly invited into the conversation, she may not have ever felt comfortable offering her useful observations.

**Developing and Promoting Talent**

- Build a career development structure that monitors how all employees are developing and creates an opportunity to move employees to the next level. Remember, while we may not be able to eliminate all aspects of unconscious bias, structured processes tend to build more equity than unstructured processes. Consider job assignments, clear performance objectives, regular feedback opportunities, and ongoing growth opportunities.

There are dozens of other ways to modify systems and structures. Once people have a basic understanding of the conceptual basis of bias from the training, they can actually work to develop alternative structures and systems that are unique to your organization. The key is to create structures that support more mindfulness and inclusive behaviors.

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**ACCOUNTABILITY**

The fourth intervention strategy is to use carefully constructed analytics in order to track how the organization is performing. One effective way to accomplish this is through “batching” of metrics. Often, diversity and inclusion metrics are reduced to “how many are there?” However, if we combine a “batch” of metrics to produce that result, we can often get a much deeper understanding of where the breakdown is in our system.

Any evaluation process starts with a goal or target. This, in and of itself, can be challenging where diversity and inclusion is concerned. Though we have rarely seen a serious business initiative that doesn’t have measurable goals, many people react negatively to diversity targets, seeing them as “quotas.” Goals or targets are simply measurements that allow us to determine how we are doing.

For example, one of our clients established a hiring goal of 40% women. They established four metrics to batch together: pipeline measurements (the percentage of people applying for jobs), the percentage of people offered jobs, the percentage of people accepting those jobs, and the percentage of people who
are hired and successful after six months on the job (because if the only thing you measure is hiring, there is no way to know if you are hiring successfully!). They tracked these goals over a four-year period, and here is what they found:

What they learned is that when they began they had a very limited pipeline (A) and were hiring virtually all of the women who applied (B). Many were getting hired because of their gender identity rather than their competence. The net result was that most of the hires were not successful (C). When they realized this they put a heavier emphasis on widening their search process and getting better applicants.

Two years later they found that far more of the people who were hired were successful (D) but they still noticed that a significant percentage of people whom they offered jobs to were not accepting them (E), so they used their Gender Equity Employee Resource Group to review the interviewing process to determine why it might not be inspiring people to accept the position. They put the appropriate changes in place and, lo and behold, two years later they had almost reached their goals (F).

This kind of use of data moves the organization from a process that is “event-based” (e.g., based upon establishing training, Black History Month, a recruitment program, etc. and seeing how things change) to one that is systems-based, and allows us to find out where in the system the breakdowns are occurring and make the appropriate corrections. In other words, diversity and inclusion work should be undertaken like any other serious business initiative.

Finally, all of these interventions require effective communication. Organizations in which bias can be openly discussed as part of a broader dialogue about diversity and inclusion dynamics can reinforce inclusive behavior. As Nobel Prize winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman has said, “The odds of limiting the constraints of biases in a group setting rise when discussion of them is widespread.” The more we can talk openly about biases within the organization, the more likely we are to spot them and find a way to constructively intervene. This kind of communication begins with organizational leadership and cascades throughout the organization.

**CONCLUSION**

There is no simple way to resolve the challenge of unconscious bias. In fact, in many cases it is not possible to eliminate it. However, we can often mitigate the impact of bias by employing a thoughtful, systemic approach that focuses on the four interventions: introducing the right kind of education, installing priming techniques, modifying structures and systems, and building the appropriate accountability measures. In this way, we can create organizational systems that support people in being more aware of their decision-making and more inclusive in their behavior. Ultimately, this produces organizations in which anyone can succeed!
To learn more about unconscious bias and how to address it in your life and organization, check out Everyday Bias: Identifying and Navigating Unconscious Judgments in Our Daily Lives, by Howard J. Ross, Published by Rowman and Littlefield, 2014 available at www.cookross.com or amazon.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Howard Ross is a lifelong social justice advocate and the Founding Partner of Cook Ross Inc. He is considered one of the world’s seminal thought leaders on identifying and addressing unconscious bias. He is the author of ReInventing Diversity: Transforming Organizational Community to Strengthen People, Purpose and Performance (published by Rowman and Littlefield in conjunction with SHRM in 2011), and the Washington Post best seller, Everyday Bias: Identifying and Navigating Unconscious Judgments in Our Daily Lives (published by Rowman and Littlefield in 2014). Cook Ross has successfully implemented large-scale organizational culture change efforts in the area of managing diversity and cultural integration in academic institutions, professional services corporations, Fortune 500 companies, and retail, health care, media, and governmental institutions in 47 of the United States and over 40 countries worldwide.

Howard’s writings have been published by the Harvard Business Review, the Washington Post, the New York Times, Fast Company Magazine, Diversity Women Magazine, Forbes Magazine, Fortune Magazine and dozens of other publications. He appears monthly on National Public Radio. He has been the recipient of many awards, including the 2009 Operation Understanding Award for Community Service; the 2012 Winds of Change Award from the Forum on Workplace Diversity and Inclusion; the 2013 Diversity Peer Award from Diversity Women Magazine; the 2014 Catalyst Award from Uptown Professional Magazine; the 2014 Catalyst for Change Award from Wake Forest University; the 2015 Trendsetter in HR by SHRM Magazine; and the 2016 Leadership in Diversity Award by the World Human Resources Development Conference in Mumbai, India.

ABOUT COOK ROSS INC.

Our mission is to provide powerful solutions to organizations around the world in the areas of diversity, inclusion, cultural competency, leadership development, and organizational change management. We are a certified women-owned consulting firm committed to creating organizations in which all people communicate effectively, recognize their value, develop as leaders, and contribute powerfully to their organizations.