Unconscious Bias Training Impact: Silver Bullet?

REPORT

Our differences are our strengths
A father and his son are in a car accident. The father is killed and the son is seriously injured. The son is taken to the hospital where the surgeon says, "I cannot operate, because this boy is my son."

We still see many organisations focused on ‘one off’ cattle dipping exercises to ‘cure’ employees of unconscious bias. Sure, understanding bias is important – but you need to go much further and you need to make it practical … AND like any new habit … you need repetition and practical action.

We hate to burst your bubble if you think you are doing well in diversity and inclusion because you are running some unconscious bias sessions – save your time and money – it won’t work and the ROI will be very limited. We have been saying this for years … and the research backs us up.

Think about the story outlined above – have you heard this story before?

This popular brain teaser dates back many years, but it remains relevant today; 40 to 75 percent of people still can’t figure it out. Those who do solve it usually take a few minutes to fathom that the boy’s mother could be a surgeon. Even when we have the best of intentions, when we hear “surgeon” or “boss,” the image that pops into our minds is usually male.

To solve this problem, business leaders, academics and journalists are working to raise awareness about bias – because they think this will fix the problem.

We are failing at diversity and inclusion – and yet, we keep taking the same approach and we are expecting a different result!

Increased attention has not resulted in greater diversity and inclusiveness.

Why?
The ‘Noah’s Ark’ approach DOES NOT WORK
The 'Noah's Ark’ approach to diversity

“Two women, two Asians, two people with disabilities, and two African Americans: diversity accomplished—or so we once thought.

At some point, corporate diversity came to mean the inclusion of at least two of every kind. Far too many managers and leaders figured that if you crammed a pair of each minority into a company or into a boardroom, you had accomplished the task of creating a diverse work environment.

Nothing, in fact, could be further from reality. The problem with this artificial ark is that much of the time, the giraffe looks at the zebra and thinks—consciously or unconsciously—‘That animal is just kind of funny looking. He doesn’t look like me. He has a foolishly short neck, silly black and white stripes and eats what looks like garbage. However, as a giraffe, I have an elegant long neck, beautiful brown and white spots and eat carefully; only the finest leaves and bark.’ And that’s just the beginning of how all of these creatures see each other...”

From The Loudest Duck by Laura Liswood

But won’t ‘unconscious bias training’ cure us all?

Laboratory studies show that this kind of force-feeding can activate bias rather than stamp it out.

Decades of social science research point to a simple truth: You won’t get managers on board by blaming and shaming them with rules and re-education.

Do people who undergo training usually shed their biases?

Researchers have been examining that question since before World War II, in nearly a thousand studies. It turns out that while people are easily taught to respond correctly to a questionnaire about bias, they soon forget the right answers.

Harvard Business Review

Poor returns on the usual diversity interventions

The positive effects of diversity training rarely last beyond a day or two, and a number of studies suggest that it can activate bias or spark a backlash.

The three most popular intervention interventions make organisations LESS diverse, NOT MORE—because managers resist strong arming!

Harvard Business Review
Five years after instituting required training for managers, companies saw no improvement in the proportion of white women, black men, and Hispanics in management, and the share of black women actually decreased by 9%, on average, while the ranks of Asian-American men and women shrank by 4% to 5%.

Many participants actually report more animosity toward other groups afterward.

Companies too often signal that training is remedial.

Companies do a better job of increasing diversity when they forgo the control tactics and frame their efforts more positively. The most effective programs spark engagement, increase contact with people who are ‘different’ or draw upon people’s strong desire to look good to others.

For example - Womens mentoring programs increased women’s representation by 18%.

Doing things the way you have always done them …will get you the same results!

The numbers sum it up. Your organisation will become less diverse, not more, if you require managers to go to diversity training, try to regulate their hiring and promotion decisions, and put in a legalistic grievance system.

A study of 829 companies over 31 years showed that diversity training had “no positive effects in the average workplace.”
The assumption is that when people realise that biases are widespread, they will be more likely to overcome them. But new research suggests that if we’re not careful, making people aware of bias can backfire, leading them to discriminate more rather than less.

In several experiments, Prof. Michelle Duguid of Washington University in St. Louis and Prof. Melissa Thomas-Hunt of the University of Virginia studied whether making people aware of bias would lessen it. They informed some people that stereotypes were rare and told others that stereotypes were common, then asked for their perceptions of women. Those who read that stereotypes were common rated women as significantly less career-oriented and more family-oriented. Even when instructed to “try to avoid thinking about others in such a manner,” people still viewed women more traditionally after reading that a vast majority held stereotypes.

In another study, Professors Duguid and Thomas-Hunt told managers that stereotypes were common or rare. Then, they asked managers to read a transcript from a job interview of a candidate described as either female or male. At the end of the interview, the candidate asked for higher compensation and a nonstandard bonus. When the managers read that many people held stereotypes, they were 28 percent less interested in hiring the female candidate. They also judged her as 27 percent less likable.

The same information did not alter their judgments of male candidates.

Research professors, Michelle Duguid and Melissa Thomas-Hunt, ran a series of experiments exploring the impact of unconscious bias messaging and demonstrated that not all training approaches are equal!

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A major influence on behaviour is what others are doing.

First, to help us gain deeper appreciation for their work, let’s go sideways and look at related research findings that you’ll find astonishing. An important petrified forest was losing tons of fossils from along its tracks. They put up a sign telling people the forest was being vandalised daily (to the tune of 14 tons annually), by the theft of mostly small pieces of fossilised material. That sign prompted an otherwise law-abiding citizen to suggest to her partner, ‘We better get ours now!’

This surprising outcome led to an experiment in that forest, with two kinds of signs. The first mentioned that many visitors were stealing fossils. The second simply asked people to preserve the forest by not taking the fossils. Using marked fossils to calculate incidence of theft, researchers found that the sign telling people about the thefts (similar to the original crime-prevention sign) actually led to three times more fossil theft than the second ‘no –stealing’ sign.

A similar surprise came from a power reduction study. When households were told they had used more energy than many others, a small (5.7%) improvement followed. No surprise. But, when households were told they had used less energy than many their once good consumption pattern actually deteriorated by 8.6%.

Can you spot the cause of these unexpectedly negative outcomes?

If you were thinking influencing and ‘social proof’, then you’re correct. A major influence on behaviour is what others are doing. People took just a little fossil because so many others were too. People reduced power consumption when shown up as being in the ‘waster’ group; but, those household praised for being above average savers, showed a dramatic turn for the worse as they decided not to be the ones to shoulder the burden and responsibility for using less power.
**Back to the unconscious bias research**

Duguid and Thomas-Hunt ran a sequence of studies on unconscious bias. Different studies looked at expressions about older adults, women and overweight people. Despite having quite different samples, outcomes were very similar. Simply, groups told that ‘unconscious bias’ was prevalent showed a lot more bias in their task than groups told that bias was not very prevalent. Furthermore, there was no difference between groups that were told they should avoid bias and groups where no such suggestions were made. The researchers found similar results in a different study that asked people to read a transcript about a request for a pay raise. The style of the request was ‘assertive masculine’. Different groups were briefed about bias as outlined before and had to decide the extent to which they’d like to work with the person in the transcript. They also judged ‘warmth’ of the candidate.

Of course, all respondents viewed the same transcript except, half thought it was Mr Harper and the other half thought it was Ms Harper. As with the other studies, respondents that received messaging about bias being very prevalent were more biased and were less willing to work with Ms Harper, who they felt was behaving atypically. The same group also judged her as being less warm. Those told bias was not prevalent didn’t show the same bias towards Ms Harper and for all groups there wasn’t much effect either way on Mr Harper who was seen as behaving in a stereotypical male way.

The final experiment involved male and female pairs negotiating the purchase price of a car. Genders were represented equally as buyers and sellers. But, only the males were divided into one of three groups receiving messaging on bias, as before. The women were asked to rate their male counterpart and note was taken of the sale price. Yet again, the group exposed to the high prevalence (HP) of bias messaging stood out. These men were judged more assertive than others. HP messaging also linked with higher negotiated prices. So, bias affected outcomes. But, what cost would it have on repeat business?

Despite having quite different samples, outcomes were very similar. Simply, **groups told that ‘unconscious bias’ was prevalent showed a lot more bias in their task than groups told that bias was not very prevalent.** Furthermore, there was no difference between groups that were told they should avoid bias and groups where no such suggestions were made.
It doesn’t need much highlighting that a lot of unconscious bias training takes the ‘high prevalence’ of unconscious bias’ approach. So, as the research suggests, it’s probably making your people more biased! There’s a simple way to test – since you’ve done the training, what kind of progress has been made. Many clients tell us, with great regret, that unconscious bias training has done little to move the gender balance agenda forward. On close inspection now, it’s even likely they’ll find it has damaged rather than promoted their gender balance efforts.

But … isn’t unconscious bias training ‘best practice’?

In the US, for example, it’s estimated that the annual ‘diversity and inclusion training’ spend tops $8 billion.

How is it that so much investment can achieve so little return?

And, even more worrying is recently released research suggesting that unconscious bias training, being used to redress the balance, could be making things worse.

We think ‘unconscious bias’ is the silver bullet because of habit.

A decade ago, ‘best practice’ suggested that unconscious bias training would help address gender balance and other diversity challenges. Although there wasn’t much evidence to show that it worked, frankly, there weren’t any more worthy alternatives available at the time!

Studies have shown that unconscious bias training doesn’t change behaviours.
Unconscious bias training has come to the fore as a potential “magic bullet” solution to building a more diverse workforce. FORBES

Google provided another trend-setting answer to that a few months later: unconscious bias. The search giant revealed it had put more than half of its then-50,000 employees through workshops on how to understand and stop unconscious bias.

The idea that you can methodically stamp out unconscious bias (also called implicit or hidden bias) has caught fire with tech companies because it’s relatively new, data-driven and blameless – everyone is told they have it and can’t avoid it, so no one is singled out or gets defensive.

In its eagerness to embrace the unconscious bias lifestyle, is Silicon Valley ignoring the possibility that it doesn’t work—or might make things even worse?

The Tech industry is “on a headlong path that looks eerily familiar to previous diversity efforts, mostly in Fortune 1000 companies,” ...“I’ve seen this movie before.”
As tantalizing as unconscious bias training is, it faces serious limits – ones that companies might be choosing to ignore...

The central contradiction of hidden bias training is that you can’t train something you can’t control. The classes suggest that you can become more objective just by learning about and thinking about your unconscious biases, but it’s not that easy.

Understanding implicit bias does not actually provide you the tools to do something about it!

Greenwald, a University of Washington psychologist thinks there may be another reason driving companies to do trainings: PUBLICITY

“Perhaps the main value of this training to Google and Facebook is to put a desirable appearance on their personnel activities by indicating their (commendable) awareness of problems and implying that they’re doing something to effectively address the problems.....”

People tend to do whatever other people are doing.

"If we say that everyone stereotypes, the norm has become that people stereotype. Now I’m not that motivated to change my behaviour because everyone’s doing it.

Our research showed that telling people everyone is biased makes them more likely to act on those biases.

Our findings left diversity advocates and scholars surprised and disarmed. Why?

Because this has been seen as the cure to all the ills of stereotyping and why people are not advancing!! And now to suggest that this might be flawed as a mechanism, people are caught off guard and don’t know where to turn.

Prof Melissa Thomas-Hunt – researcher who found that unconscious bias training can make things worse.

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Google was the first high-profile tech company to initiate a diversity training program that sought to uncover employees’ unconscious biases. The two-year-old program has yielded interesting results.

When it launched its unconscious bias training in 2014, the tech giant’s workforce was made up of 30% women and 70% men.

The proportion of African-American employees stood at 2%; Hispanic employees, 3%; Asian employees, 30%; and white employees, 61%.

Fast forward to a year later, the needle has largely remained nearly locked in the same position.

Women accounted for 30% of Google’s workforce, while men stood at 70% — unchanged from the previous year.

Only slight movement was seen in the ethnic compensation of Google’s workforce, with Asian employees rising to 31% of the workforce in 2015 from 30% a year ago, and white employees dropping to 60% compared with 61% a year earlier.

Hispanic and African-American employee numbers remained unchanged in their percentage of the workforce.

Now, researchers have found (October 2014) that much of the unconscious bias training today is actually hindering, rather than helping the cause. Thankfully, other approaches that have been shown to work are now available to the enlightened.
An expanded view: SEE the result NOW

It offers a more inclusive and engaging discussion than one focused on visible diversity, which is often binary and therefore divisive.

It creates a new line of inquiry about the nature of the business case, shifting the question from:

“How can increasing gender and racial diversity help us improve business outcomes?”

to

“How rich is our knowledge bank?”

‘Do we have the variety of perspectives necessary to deal with complex problems and create innovative solutions?’

‘Are we fully valuing and leveraging the potential of all our employees?’

Inclusive Leadership is the enabler to BOTTOM LINE PERFORMANCE.

One off workshops on inclusive leadership DON’T WORK EITHER.

In order to get BEHAVIOURAL change – the approach needs to educate over a period of time, require action and experimenting and accountability.

That’s why we created Courage: Inclusive Leadership in Action.

Our CILA program empowers leaders to ‘walk the talk’ on inclusion and engagement, create an effective inclusive culture, and to observe the positive business impact straight away.

Pretending to be something that you are not takes energy. When I come to work and I cannot be my real self, its hard. It’s not overt and typically not because of malice – but I feel like I am non overtly excluded.

When I feel excluded, cannot really be myself, feel that I don’t really fit in or that I am part of the ‘in’ crowd – I cannot ever be a fully engaged employee.