Brown Bagger

This section is set up to provide a ready-made Brown Bag Session for you to use with employees and/or managers. Use as is, or adapt this information for a general employee group. You may reproduce as many copies as needed.

Dealing with Unconscious Bias

By Howard J. Ross

Raise your hand if you are biased. If you were slow to raise your hand, you are not alone. Many of us are reluctant to admit we harbor some bias. We have been taught that to be biased means that we are bad. Or worse, that we are bigots and discriminators. But bias is a normal part of human behavior. It helps us make snap decisions that can save us from danger or protect our families and livelihoods.

But it can also interfere with our desire to appreciate others and be fair to all. We all strive to be aware of the judgments we make about others. But it takes practice to question your gut instincts. Bias resides inside all of us, whether we like it or not.

Most Bias is Cultural – and NOT Conscious

New research and insights into organizational behavior reveals that most of the bias we may feel or exhibit exists in our unconscious. Much of that bias is cultural and is learned from our families of origin. We assume our own beliefs and norms are well…normal. We assume others share our perspective. Imagine inviting someone into your home. What if you said to this person, *Make yourself at home* and he/she went to the refrigerator and drank orange juice right from the carton? Clearly, we all have different views and unique ways of navigating our environments!

Organizations that truly wish to create diverse employee populations and more inclusive workplaces have struggled for decades with overcoming bias. Clearly, individuals and groups should pay attention to how race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and multiple identities should be managed so that all employees can be successful, contributing members of their organizations.

But more times than not, people make choices that discriminate against one group and in favor of another, *without even realizing that they are doing it*. All of us need practice to reveal our thinking and understand not only *what* we think, but also *how* we think.

Six Steps in Dealing with Bias

The following are six "conscious" steps to help an employee or manager deal with unconscious bias:

❖ *Tell the truth to yourself and notice what influences your decisions* – Remember that *all* humans have unconscious preferences and biases, which is completely normal, and that those preferences and biases impact most, if not all, of the decisions we make, *including those regarding people.* Be willing to honestly admit your biases. Also, keep in mind that unconscious preference and biases can influence decision-making in both negative as well as positive ways.

> "The natural tendency of the mind is to continue with the same 'mental model' or set of rules that you were operating in or most comfortable using. We all have mental models, habits, routines, and shortcuts that affect our thinking."

❖ *Gather data about yourself* – The Implicit Association Test *(*IAT, www.implicit.harvard.edu*)* can help identify unconscious preferences. Taking one or more of the IATs is a free, voluntary activity that can be done at home on your own PC. Keep track of your decisions and review them to see if there are any patterns that may not have been apparent to you (e.g., similarities in the persons you socialize with, people your hire or select to be on your team.) Patterns don't automatically indicate bias. But if you see a pattern, it would be wise to examine it further.

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❖ **Stretch your comfort zone** – If you discover that you view a particular group with discomfort, make a conscious effort to learn more about that group. Expose yourself to positive images and other information related to that group. Don't be afraid to question yourself. If others question your decisions, instead of reacting defensively, try to listen to the feedback. Be open to change.

❖ **Stimulate your curiosity about others** – When you interact with a person who is part of a group with which you have had little interaction, be aware that you may be especially susceptible to stereotyping, which can lead to false or negative assumptions about that person. Make a conscious effort to learn more about that individual as well as his/her group, recognizing that interaction with one person does not predict or explain his or her group norms.

❖ **Expand your constellation of input** – Get input from people representing other groups or points of view during your decision-making process. One of the best ways to bring concealed beliefs and how they affect behavior out into the open is to request peer feedback regarding potential preference patterns. Most of us are nervous to do this because we are inherently afraid of what we might hear. But are we better off with people *thinking* it and not *telling* us?

❖ **If you mess it up, clean it up!** Don't be afraid to go to somebody and apologize if you feel that they have been treated unfairly, excluded because of who they are, or not recognized for what they contribute. Make the situation right and then evaluate the system that led to the decision and explore ways you can improve the process for the future.

Summary

Bias occurs because our fundamental way of encountering the world is driven by a hard-wired pattern of making unconscious decisions about others based on what feels safe, likeable, valuable, and competent. And that includes our reactions to the people we live with and work with every day.

• The pathway to overcoming bias begins by accepting how normal it is.
• When we accept that we have normal biases, it becomes much easier to observe how they may be impacting our decisions or reactions.
• Accepting personal biases makes them *less*, not more likely to impact others.

We are all human and so is bias. Engaging in these six steps is the first big step on a journey toward creating organizations where all people have their best shot at being successful.

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Promoting Diversity

We have all heard about the need for workplaces to embrace diversity. Today's workplaces are built on teams, which means that managers need to get a variety of employees to effectively work together to accomplish the task at hand.

However, failure to adequately address diversity issues impacts more than productivity. Diminished morale may erode commitment to the organization and result in higher rates of turnover or absenteeism. It may also leave the company at a disadvantage when attempting to attract capable and innovative employees.

Put another way, an absence of diversity may lead to a loss of creativity and innovation that can adversely affect a company. Today's workplaces need more than a mere token expression of diversity; they require a "respectful" approach in day-to-day operations. *Employee assistance programs are in an ideal position to assist in this effort*.

EAP's Role in Promoting Diversity

Employee assistance programs can play a major role in promoting workplace diversity and creating respectful workplaces by:

❖ Developing seminars or workshops, newsletters,

posters, or other resources that increase awareness about racial, cultural, and other differences may prove useful.

❖ Promoting effective communication through skill training or other communication tools is another option that may address a number of issues simultaneously. For example, EAPs may partner with HR to deliver trainings or presentations about diversity and culture at company new hire orientations or department meetings.

❖ Encouraging cross-cultural activities is yet another idea for EA professionals to consider. Provide opportunities for employees to interact with co-workers who are "different" in some way – be it race, culture, etc. For instance, you could encourage employees of a specific race and/or culture to prepare an ethnic food for lunch, or management could help break down barriers about gender identity issues by showing a video about a transsexual who "comes out" in the workplace.

Consultation and collaboration with managers is a major function of most EAPs. The EAP may assist managers by discussing the following steps when dealing with issues related to diversity, culture, respect, and communication.

❖ *REALLY listen*. Taking the time to listen with genuine concern and compassion is an important first step. Seeking understanding is a close second. Approaching communication with curiosity about other points of view helps individuals to feel valued, even if you don't agree with them.

❖ *Practice sensitivity*. Regardless what you learn about another person, the point is that exposing yourself to different opinions and values will go a long way toward overcoming any prejudices or misunderstanding that you may have. Put another way, learn, don't assume!

❖ *Show empathy*. Acknowledge emotions, and demonstrate acceptance and understanding of other people's feelings.

❖ *Educate*. Help others understand the value of diversity, respect, and communication in the workplace.
❖ *Teach others that silence is NOT golden*.

Many times, we don't say anything about an individual's "differences" because we want to avoid appearing rude or because we're caught "off guard." As a society, we generally are not comfortable discussing someone's race, culture, sexual orientation, etc. And yet, these areas may profoundly affect the workplace. While it's important to be tactful, saying nothing doesn't work either. Silence perpetuates problems and may even be viewed as a sign of approval of an inappropriate action. Bear in mind that "we" see things as WE ARE, not as SOMEONE ELSE is. This understanding can help with perceptions – since perceptions become judgments and, eventually lead to action (good or bad).

❖ *Show managers how to lead by example*. Whether they want to or not, managers sometimes need to talk about sensitive issues with their employees. Learning to respect others will help prevent potential conflicts and other problems. Managers should strive to create a "safe" environment in which all kinds of workplace issues are discussed.

Key Traits
The key traits (i.e. characteristics) of employees and employers who understand and know how to deal with their unconscious biases are as follows:

❖ **Warmth**: Someone who is willing to work with people from different backgrounds, and who unconditionally accepts work colleagues with cultural and other differences.

❖ **Empathy**: Someone who is sensitive to other people's feelings, and who has the ability to accurately and tactfully communicate with others; and

❖ **Genuineness**: Someone with the ability to be flexible and spontaneous, and who is authentically "open" and not phony with others. ∎

Sources: "Linguistic and Cultural Diversity – Building on America's Strengths"; and "Achieving Cultural Competence" by the Administration on Aging.

Addressing Prejudicial Barriers

❖ **Recognize that bias exists**. Acknowledge that because we live in a society in which many biases exist – we must counteract them – or we will support them through our silence. Even if prejudices are not present in a specific work setting, that doesn't mean that they don't exist. Like it or not, we can't sweep these unfortunate truths under the rug.

❖ **Practice cultural, racial, and/or other sensitivity**. Because bias is often the result of a lack of information, it's crucial to not assume. Take the time to learn about the beliefs, values, and practices of a race, culture, or other minority group. Exposing yourself to different opinions and values will go a long way toward overcoming any prejudice or misunderstandings that you may have.

❖ **Don't tolerate prejudicial behavior**. Employees need to stand up to peers who use racial put-downs, even if they don't mean anything by them. For instance, an employee might respond to his or her use of a racial joke by saying something like, *Aw, you know I didn't mean anything by it!* Is this, in fact, the case – or is it possible that this person secretly harbors some sort of prejudice, even if he/she doesn't realize it? Employees must admit to their own misgivings, find a good listener (not a person in that particular minority group), and determine the real reasons behind the behavior.

❖ **Recognize and appreciate each other's differences**. While it's important for managers and supervisors to treat their employees fairly – they needn't take this so far that they, in essence, "pretend" that racial, cultural, and other differences don't exist. Acknowledge that people are,

in fact, different. The EA professional can play a pivotal role in addressing the barriers that may be preventing an employee of a given minority background, from seeking employee services.

Summary

Whether one wants to call it prejudicial barriers or dealing with unconscious bias – as Howard Ross does in the main section of the *Brown Bagger* – the goals in addressing these obstacles are twofold: for the EA professional, it helps overcome barriers that might exist that could be preventing certain employees from seeking services available through the EAP.

For employees and their employers: it involves continuing to learn about differences to improve communication, and to rid themselves of any stereotypes and prejudices that they might have. Addressing prejudicial barriers – regardless of the minority group – demands an approach in which knowledge, not assumptions, becomes the norm. ∎

Source: "Achieving Cultural Competence" by the Administration on Aging.