

Fixing Our Blind Spots

Improving cultural competency can help organizations and individuals take implicit biases out of the talent-management equation

By Melissa Campeau

Implicit bias is a bit like a driver's blind spot, with one important exception: you know that blind spot is there. To compensate for the spot your mirrors can't find, you get into the habit of doing shoulder checks for safety. You're conscious of your blind spot, so you make a point of addressing it. But imagine if you had another blind spot in the car – one you didn't even know existed. How does that change the likelihood of a safe trip from A to B?

In an organizational context, implicit biases – a preference for or belief about a particular group of people – are the blind spots you don't know you have. And when bias plays its silent hand in decision-making, it can have a profound impact on nearly every aspect of business.

Impacts

“What's intriguing about blind spots is how pervasive and automatic they are,” said Norma Tombari, director of global diversity and inclusion for RBC in Toronto. “We're not even aware that they're there. Even the most open-minded liberal person, who thinks they don't have any biases, almost certainly does. It speaks to how our brains are hard-wired because of the various experiences we're all subjected to: where we live, where we work, the messages we've processed and internalized over a lifetime.”

Those unconscious beliefs can shift the shape of organizations, from top to bottom. An unacknowledged but pervasive belief that men make better leaders, for example, can result in a largely male collection of senior executives. Or a belief that parents



will be less committed to their work may mean all senior executives are single or have already-grown children. And negative stereotypes about people from particular backgrounds can mean an organization unwittingly misses out on recruiting, promoting or developing its most talented prospects.

“Over the years, we've seen implicit bias exhibited in every single facet of the employee lifecycle,” said Jodi Zigelstein-Yip, director, HR Consulting Services for Williams HR Consulting in Markham, Ont. “There's no area, from attracting talent to retirement, that's not affected.”

Examining “gut feelings”

In some areas, though, the impact of bias is especially frequent, where tough-to-quantify feelings and impressions can sway decision makers.

“When I speak with leaders about the process they take to review resumes and to evaluate the candidates coming out of interviews, I often hear things like, ‘They're just not a fit,’ or ‘I just have a gut feeling that this person won't cut it here,’” said Zigelstein-Yip. “When we try to dig a little deeper, there are no reasonable hard facts to support why they don't want to bring a



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certain individual on board or to recruit them onto a certain team.”

Removing that bias is a question of performance, ethics and the law.

“To choose the best possible talent for an organization and for a team, and to ensure compliance with the Human Rights Code and AODA, we have to be able to substantiate why we’re choosing certain candidates over others,” said Zigelstein-Yip.

The path to cultural competency

The term “cultural competency” has gained traction in recent years, and in many ways it’s the flipside or the antidote to hidden bias.

“Cultural competency means you have the foresight to be inclusive of everybody,” said Zigelstein-Yip. “It’s more than diversity and cultural sensitivity, although that’s part of the puzzle. There is no ridding individuals or teams of biases without some cultural sensitivity training.”

Cultural competency takes the foundation of diversity and cultural sensitivity, and builds upon it.

“It’s layering on how you acknowledge and validate who people are,” said Zigelstein-Yip.

“It’s about understanding cultural differences and seeing beyond them, so that we’re best able to leverage the capability of our talent and not just look at people through one lens – the North American lens,” said

Tombari. “For example, different cultures may subscribe to different protocols. We may have individuals from teams who don’t submit ideas unless they’re asked to, or who are less prone to market themselves. If we know that, we can work to draw out the best in everyone.”

HR’s role in coaching cultural competency is key.

“If you have candidates on a short list, for example, an HR professional should help the hiring manager ensure the right decision is made by challenging the outcomes, providing constructive feedback and engaging people in a deeper dialogue to address any unconscious bias,” said Tombari.

Objectivity

One effective way to set biases aside when making decisions is to rely solely on objective information.

If, for example, senior executives are asked to select candidates for a high potential program, it shouldn’t be a simple matter of thinking about the team and jotting a few names down on paper.

“What we encourage clients to do, in this situation, is create an objective method for assessing their talent. We look at four key criteria for assessing potential so all candidates for the program are evaluated on a level playing field. The assessment asks a series of questions and everyone goes through the same rating process,” said Zigelstein-Yip. “We’ve seen significant change in those

identified for the high potential development due to this objective method of assessing talent.”

In the case of restructuring or organizational transformation, Zigelstein-Yip has similar advice.

“Age bias may be a factor in situations where leaders are thinking that a particular employee or group of employees are closer to retirement than they are, so the leaders believe it makes more sense to let that person or those people go,” she said. But with the end of mandatory retirement, this argument is faulty, and it’s also a biased assumption that shouldn’t come into the equation.

“So what we recommend doing is looking at what you need in your future business before you look at your talent,” said Zigelstein-Yip. “Then, create an objective set of criteria to rate every single employee on your team based on the exact same criteria so you can make an informed decision as to the talent you’ve decided to restructure. You have to be able to substantiate why you chose particular people.”

It’s easy to imagine quantifying technical skills, but softer skills can be effectively measured, as well.

“We look at behavioural competencies and determine which ones are required for each role,” said Zigelstein-Yip. “Take teamwork, for example. There are ways to define effective teamwork. So we’ll design ten or 11 questions about teamwork that will determine whether an employee respects others’

opinions, collaborates with others, shares their perspective and so on.”

Competitive advantage

With a culturally competent workforce, an organization is in a position to take advantage of such things as diversity of thought and differing viewpoints, methods of solving problems and making decisions.

“It really allows the talents to be in the driver’s seat. When that happens, they’re free to bring their best selves to work every day and push the envelope,” said Zigelstein-Yip. “With really culturally competent workplaces, there’s an improved sense of engagement and empowerment. Even things like risk taking and innovation tend to come to the forefront compared to a less culturally competent workplace.”

Conversely, a lack of cultural competency has a negative impact on communication and how well people can genuinely connect.

“Biases affect relationships, they affect communication. It’s tough to collaborate if you can’t communicate. And without collaboration, it’s difficult to foster innovation. Ultimately, that has a real impact on our competitiveness,” said Tombari. “We must work to create an inclusive environment where talent is able to contribute fully. It’s important to better serve our clients.”

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Not a quick fix

Biases are developed over a lifetime, so working to identify and mitigate them isn’t a weekend project.

“This isn’t an area where you offer one course and then it’s all done. It’s really about embedding the approaches within the talent-management and decision-making process,” said Tombari.

Certain changes do signal progress, though.

“It’s great to be at the table when a decision is being made and someone asks, ‘Are we being biased? Do we have a blind spot?’” said Tombari. “I remember one occasion where a team was put together for a project and someone looked around the table and said, ‘My goodness, we’re all the same age.’

They thought of gender, of cultural differences, but forgot about age. Being able to act on that is really powerful.”

The blind spot you know is much easier to manage than the one you don’t. If an employee is aware of biases, he can do something about them.

“We all have biases and prejudices, but when we come to work, we need to bracket our personal biases and put them aside, in order to stay focused on the task before us,” said Sally Ellis Fletcher, a former professor at the University of Rochester and the author of *Cultural Sensibility in Healthcare*.

What’s necessary, as well, is philosophical support.

“If there’s nothing in the organization’s mis-



sion and vision that talks about diversity and inclusivity, then it may not be high on the organization's priorities," said Ellis Fletcher. "When it comes to cultural diversity, inclusivity and equity, HR professionals have the unique position to pause and assess the organization's pulse on this issue. Be that flashlight and do that organizational assessment."

Assessing and developing

While cultural competency may seem a difficult thing to quantify, measurement is entirely possible. It's necessary, too, to ensure you're moving the needle. But simply assessing how diverse a workforce is will really only measure diversity. It's important to delve a little deeper and get a read on employees' attitudes and interactions.

"With our clients, I suggest assessing cultural competency whenever there's an opportunity," said Zigelstein-Yip. Targeted questions can be included in engagement surveys, self-assessments, exit interviews or even small focus groups. "Get your first benchmark, then resurvey and see if you've made an impact."

At the heart of cultural competency challenges – and therefore the root of opportunity for improvement – are employee communications, miscommunications and conflict.

"Investigating this area can shed light on any attitudes or perceptions people may hold towards certain groups or individuals," said Zigelstein-Yip. "Depending on how you end up coming out of your investigative process, you can determine where you need to go." You may, for example, need to go back and do a little more cultural awareness and sensitivity training. "The good news is that some of those biases tend to lessen as you create awareness."

That training, though, needs to be backed up by policies and practices that support cultural competency at every turn.

"You have to take a very holistic approach before you start doing any training," said Zigelstein-Yip. For example, organizations in the IT sector would be hard-pressed to ask a manager of a predominantly male team to be more inclusive of female team



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members, if the organization has historically allowed gender bias to influence its hiring, promoting and training practices. "It's easy to say, 'Let's do training,' and there are many good programs out there, but it can become nothing more than a Band-Aid if an organization doesn't have the infrastructure to support real cultural competency."

Success fuels more success

With a thoughtful and long-term approach, cultural competency is likely to lead to a more diverse workforce.

"As you become more comfortable with these concepts and become more inclusive, you start to see more diversity in leadership ranks," said Tombari. "You see stronger representation at the VP level and above."

That becomes self-sustaining, as well. Research tells us that with increased exposure to an opposite association, our biases tend to recede. So a greater number of female

senior executives and CEOs reduce the implicit bias that women are less effective leaders. More Gen Xers and Boomers working on code projects reduces the notion that anyone over 40 can't excel in an IT role.

Another bit of good news? People are genuinely interested in this subject, and usually quite keen to learn.

"It's about self betterment, both personally and professionally, and it speaks to everyone – it's not a women's issue or a race issue," said Tombari. "When you open doors to this topic, the interest is incredible. People take ownership. They're curious. It's an area that requires time, but it's absolutely worth the investment."

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