



SOME UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTHS ABOUT UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

Building an inclusive culture

1. Recognise that ordinary decision making can be affected by many different 'unconscious biases'. Also, acknowledge that your people probably aren't psychologists. Expose them to training that helps them make better decision generally, rather than focusing purely on 'unconscious bias' which is only one of more than 170 cognitive biases.
2. Focus specifically on tangible workplace actions that build inclusion before allocating time for actions aimed specifically at countering implicit bias. This a solution- rather than problem-centered focus. It ensures your primary aim of inclusiveness is the main focus.
3. While you'll have to understand the needs of particular groups, first developing a general culture of inclusion across the organisation is likely to deliver broad dividends. It will create a tolerant and collaborative climate in which any particular needs are more readily dealt with.

What do you think this briefing will cover?

Since cognitive bias is the focus of this briefing, an upfront 'spoiler alert' seems appropriate. If you've staked the progress of your organisation's 'under represented' groups on largely 'unconscious bias' centred initiatives, then this may be an uncomfortable read! That said, chances are you're already disappointed with the relative lack of progress these initiatives have delivered and are looking for a solution that works.

You're not alone! This is the experience of too many organisations with a genuine desire to overcome diversity challenges. They have enthusiastically (often at great expense) focused on unconscious bias training specifically, but have little to show for their investment or commitment over years. Some have even demonstrated they're worse off.

UGM approached the topic a little more subtly in a briefing 'Make Diversity Work' back in 2012. Our concern at the time was gender balance, more specifically the glaring lack of women on boards and in senior management positions. Two years on and still very little progress— in fact, numerous ASX firms have reported slipping backwards, following only an initial bump upwards. A disappointing outcome for organisations and individuals.

UGM feels compelled to call out loudly, and more directly this time, "the primacy of 'unconscious bias' initiatives being used to address gender balance and diversity challenges in organisations have shown little benefit." Actually, this lack of progress has damaged the diversity 'cause'. For example, a client passionate about gender equality recounted the "terrible and stereotypical" unconscious bias intervention delivered by a prominent advocate. Despite the costly intervention, no improvement!

Are you asking/answering the right question?

How is it that so much can be attempted with such abysmal outcomes? A quirky aside from Dubner and Levitt in their new book, *Think Like a Freak*, provides a profound insight. They tell of Takeru Kobayashi, who not only set a new world record for hot dog eating, he obliterated the competition by doubling the existing record. After decades of competition, the record stood at 25 hotdogs in 12 minutes. Kobayashi upped that to 50 in one attempt!

How did he do it? Very strategically, the researchers discovered. Over the decades, contestants had asked the question, "how can I eat more hotdogs in 12 minutes?" Kobayashi asked a different question for his breakthrough: "How can I eat a single hotdog more quickly?" He also considered the standing record an invalid indicator of possibility, since it was answering a different question. Along with other preparations, it helped him smash this quirky record.

UGM believes that gender balance and diversity progress is also being hampered by the wrong strategic question. Also, that wrong question is well past its use-by date. Initially, it was helpful to ask "Why are particular groups of people over-represented in important contexts while others are under-represented?" A fundamental answer: "unconscious bias". While the question and answer advanced understanding, both have proved ineffective in addressing the primary problem. There are a number of reasons for this failure.

Unconscious bias may not be what you think it is!

First, the term 'unconscious bias' is a neutral term for normal 'attitudinal bias towards particular groups of people'. It's not itself a value judgement. But, it's increasingly used synonymously with terms like 'prejudice' and even 'acceptable standards'. Using it this way is flawed and the associations are unhelpful.

Take a look at the excellent Wikipedia list of more than 170 'unconscious biases' that affect thinking. Focusing on one means missing many that are likely contributing to the challenge! Sociology Professor, William Bielby, has commented that "*those who view discrimination in contemporary workplaces as grounded in psychological processes of implicit bias offer remedies that are based on a shallow reading of the relevant psychological science*".

In fact Dr Anthony Greenwald, the co-researcher who surfaced the term 'implicit bias', warned of limitations. Greenwald urged that "*caution is warranted in speculating that repeated interventions...will have enduring effects on levels of implicit bias*." Other researchers found that "*diversity training... designed to alter attitudes and behaviour...[is] generally ineffective and, in some circumstances, counterproductive*."

Additionally, the powerful emotional associations with prejudice and bigotry might have helped diversity advocates get attention for their cause, but substantial resources, devoted over decades to this approach, have yielded little diversity progress. Perhaps this is why some researchers have, possibly rather harshly, declared it to be "junk science".

Asking a better question

Armed with useful insights about 'unconscious bias', the focus must necessarily return to the original challenge. Now, ask a different question. Instead of asking "why are groups over- or under-represented", you should be asking "how can we build an inclusive organisational culture?" Your measure of success is then the extent to which your people are included, not simply knowing why they aren't!

Change your question and you'll need to change your response to the challenge. Asking the better question opens a multitude of new possibilities.