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Bringing Hidden Biases Into the Light

Big Businesses Teach Staffers How 'Unconscious Bias' Impacts Decisions

By

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ARLINGTON, Va.—Everyone has hidden biases. For Denise Russell Fleming, a vice president at BAE Systems Inc., they include overlooking quieter colleagues during meetings. "I may have not made the best decisions" because of inadequate input from introverts, she says, adding that she tends to favor more talkative personalities.

As they struggle to diversify their workforces, big businesses are teaching staffers to recognize that "unconscious bias"—or an implicit preference for certain groups—often influences important workplace decisions.

BAE, a major defense contractor, is among the growing number of U.S. corporations offering training programs aimed at overcoming these hidden biases. As many as 20% of large U.S. employers with diversity programs now provide unconscious-bias training, up from 2% five years ago, and that figure could hit 50% in five years, says Margaret Regan, head of FutureWork Institute, a global diversity consultancy.

"It is the most requested and popular diversity topic now," says Ms. Regan, whose firm recently instructed 2,000 Microsoft Corp. MSFT -0.64% managers about unconscious bias.

Everyone unwittingly favors certain types of people based on their upbringing, experience and values because human beings need bias to survive, diversity experts say. For example, you might prefer fellow graduates of your alma mater. Left unchecked on the job, though, unconscious bias can affect hiring, assignments, promotions, evaluations and dismissals.

BAE requires that all 1,600 middle managers and executives take a two-hour class about unconscious bias. The company partly credits the management training for an increase in the number of women and people of color targeted for advancement last year. Its experience also illustrates the advantages and drawbacks of the approach.

The training, designed by diversity consultants Cook Ross Inc., was aimed at getting managers to identify where bias crept into their thought processes rather than blaming anyone for the scarcity of women and minorities in top spots.

"I don't want you to feel guilty about any biases that you have," trainer Melissa Lambert told Ms. Fleming and nine others at an Arlington, Va., class late last year.

During the next two hours, attendees watched brief videos, participated in partner exercises and discussed research summaries to understand why bosses make employment decisions that inadvertently give preference to tall individuals, thin ones, those without arm tattoos or extroverts.

"It's a blind spot," Ms. Lambert observed. The trick is to "hit the pause button and question things" before you act, she said.

The training also exposed some internal tension. Midway through the session, a participant complained that colleagues didn't take her seriously because she was only 24 years old.

So-called millennials, young adults born since 1981, "don't want to work for what they get," and they expect to move up quickly merely because they completed college, retorted Diane Parisi, a 41-year-old vice president with two young subordinates.

In the workplace, Ms. Parisi admitted afterward, the bias she expressed probably "caused me to paint millennials with a broader negative brush than I should."

A typical one-day course for 50 people costs an average of \$2,000 to \$6,000, estimates Howard Ross, founder of Cook Ross. Dow Chemical Co., [Google Inc.](#), [GOOG -0.96%](#) [Pfizer Inc.](#) [PFE -0.06%](#) and PricewaterhouseCoopers have also recently trained numerous staffers to spot hidden biases. More than 13,000 of Google's roughly 46,000 global staffers attended a workshop in 2013 that emphasized "situations where the influence of unconscious bias might be especially bad," such as performance reviews, a Google spokeswoman says.

Dow has trained 800 of its 4,600 managers world-wide since 2011—and seen the number of women in professional positions rise to 32.4% from 29.7% in that time. Unconscious-bias training played a strong role in that gain, says Johanna Soderstrom, a human-resources vice president at the large chemicals maker. At Microsoft, the training helps hold leaders "accountable for building a diverse culture," a spokeswoman says.

[Enlarge Image](#)

Unconscious-bias training arose from the Implied Association Test, a measure of hidden stereotypes invented in 1994 by Tony Greenwald, a University of Washington psychology professor. The online

version has been taken more than 15 million times since its 1998 introduction, with most test takers showing a preference for white people, according to Brian Nosek, a co-developer.

Prof. Greenwald warns that unconscious-bias training often "is just window dressing" that fails to alter work practices. "You don't go to a class and next week, everything changes," adds Linda Hudson, chief executive of BAE, the U.S. arm of [BAE Systems](#) [BAESY +1.05%](#) PLC.

Nonetheless, diversity specialists say, companies that pair training with such tactics as joint interviews of applicants and requirements that candidate slates include diverse prospects tend to see faster improvement.

BAE launched its unconscious-bias training amid a multipronged push to bring more women and minorities into its managerial ranks.

Among the efforts Ms. Hudson spearheaded in 2011: A woman or a person of color now participates in interview panels for potential middle managers and executives. The hiring panels previously "had a tendency to select white males," recalls Bridgette A. Weitzel, BAE's chief talent officer. Between May 2011 and May 2013, BAE says, the number of women and people of color in senior management rose nearly 10%

As for Ms. Fleming, the class forced her to recognize that unconscious biases "are part of who I am," she remarked later.

She has begun giving her staffers advance notice about difficult meeting topics "so there will be more time for the more introspective folks to assimilate their thoughts." The executive also hopes to switch to "blind" résumés—documents without an applicant's name or address.

This idea, discussed during her training, "sounds like a clean way of taking all the variables out," Ms. Fleming says. BAE says it may eventually embrace blind résumés company-wide.

In one study of 1,250 employers, dummy résumés with typically "white" names received 50% more interview callbacks than those with typically "black" names.

"The best possible person [should] come into a role without letting my unconscious biases interfere," Ms. Fleming concludes.

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