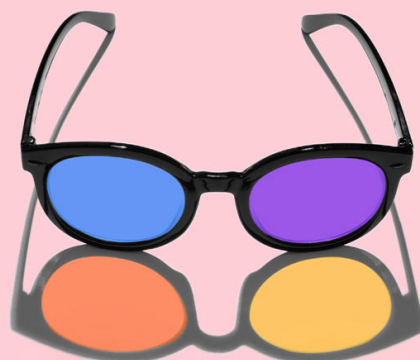




Diversity and Inclusion



A Simple Exercise to Help You Check Your Biases

Five science-backed tools to help managers address the most common DEI challenges. **by Anu Gupta**

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The corporate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) sector is at a crossroads. Two decades of rigorous research built the business case for DEI efforts. Studies consistently show that racially diverse teams outperform their competitors in terms of profitability, and corporations with women comprising more than a quarter of their executive committees realize 10 times higher profit margin than those with no female board members.

In 2020, after George Floyd was killed and the subsequent U.S. uprising took place, in response to consumer demand, businesses trusted this research to adopt DEI efforts to support their management and team trust-building and ultimately to enhance their bottom-line performance and reduce wasted costs. In the last two years, however, the widespread backlash against DEI has led many companies to withdraw resources from or slash their DEI teams entirely. Others, like SHRM have dropped the “E” in DEI or have rebranded DEI with terms that are considered more “neutral” like engagement, purpose, community, and belonging.

While also heavily politically motivated, the central argument beneath the backlash is that the way DEI efforts are implemented foster workplace conflict, shame, blame, and guilt. The lawmakers and conservative detractors leading the attacks have capitalized on these emotions to politicize what is an essential part of business strategy in an increasingly diverse workplace and world.

While the future of DEI at large is uncertain, managers as individuals still need to be equipped to address and mitigate conflicts in their workplaces, especially if they supervise teams with diverse views and identities, and manage up to meet business objectives. This is where managers can utilize neuroscience to tackle the root cause of most DEI challenges: bias.

The Root Cause of DEI Challenges: Bias

As a lawyer and a social scientist, I became a DEI professional accidentally. Early in my legal career, I conducted a cross-industry study at the Vera Institute of Justice and identified the root cause of identity-based challenges across sectors: bias. But contrary to popular beliefs, my research uncovered that biases are not inherent. We weren't born believing that men are better at math than women or that white people are better leaders than people of color. Rather, these stereotypes

like all biases are learned habits that take two forms: conscious biases which are learned false beliefs and unconscious biases which are learned habits of thoughts. Both forms distort how humans perceive, reason, remember, and make decisions.

These habits are not personal, rather — as science demonstrates — they are how human brains have been trained to associate false concepts with traits such as skin color, hair texture, accent, tone of voice, and gender, among others. Neuropsychologist Donald Hebb named this process: “neurons that fire together wire together.”

To address conscious biases in the workplace, businesses often rely on corporate HR policies, trainings, and legal remedies. However, unconscious biases, which are more difficult to detect and address, are at the root of most DEI challenges. They include obstacles in diverse hiring, retention, advancement, and compensation, as well as miscommunications that may be perceived as microaggressions and inequities reflected in performance assessments. Additionally, unconscious biases can affect customer service, product development, and advertising strategies.

Unchecked unconscious biases also create workplaces in which managers lack the skills to deal with conflict, disagreements, and misunderstandings, which create numerous costs such as attrition, litigation, and poor performance. Furthermore, such biases fracture trust, hinder psychological safety, and result in less effective and poor-performing teams. According to one study by SHRM, racial bias alone costs American businesses up to \$54 billion annually and lost productivity due to such biases cost an additional \$59 billion annually.

Regardless of the future of DEI, in today’s business environment, managers are more accountable than ever to build and lead teams to

combat unconscious biases. This brings me to some good news: Just as unconscious biases are learned, they can be unlearned thanks to the phenomenon known as neuroplasticity. There are five science-backed tools in particular that I collectively call PRISM that can support teams in unlearning unconscious biases.

Unlearning Unconscious Biases with PRISM Tools

PRISM is an acronym for five tools that have each been shown to be efficacious in measurably reducing bias with regular practice. It stands for Perspective-Taking, pRosocial Behavior, Individuation, Stereotype Replacement, and Mindfulness. The practice of PRISM begins with Mindfulness and we work our way up to Perspective-Taking.

With PRISM tools, managers train their minds to notice and mitigate the interference of false assumptions and stereotypes in their decision-making. In addition, leaders can introduce these tools within the workplace in subtle ways to help teams unlearn the habit of bias and replace it with what makes work rewarding: collaboration, curiosity, creativity, empathy, joy, and skillful communication.

Having trained over 80,000 professionals at over 300 organizations in these tools, the promise of them lies in their simplicity and ability to be practiced at any time, anywhere to yield transformative results. Here are some ways managers and leaders can implement these tools in their workplace.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness has been shown to be incredibly effective in reducing unconscious bias. Mindfulness in this context is the act of noticing, labeling, and becoming aware of stereotypes that automatically arise in one's mind based on another person's identities. The idea here isn't to suppress stereotypical thoughts or judge or shame oneself for having such thoughts, but to become an observer of one's experience by

noticing and acknowledging them alongside any bodily sensations that accompany such thoughts.

Such awareness helps team members label the automatic assumptions as stereotypical or harmful and avoid using them in their decision-making. Neurologically, this process helps interrupt and weaken the firing and wiring of false concepts with various human identities like race or gender. Mindfulness is the bedrock of PRISM because it enables teams to make the unconscious conscious.

For my client Sheila, who oversees a team of lawyers at a large healthcare organization, this has meant silently noticing and naming the assumptions that arise in her mind when she's with her team and external stakeholders. This simple mindfulness practice has allowed her to weaken the hold of such assumptions and see others for who they actually are.

As a leader, she also shared her process with her team and introduced the practice of taking a collective “mindful minute” at the beginning and end of every meeting to help her team strengthen mindfulness and mitigate unconscious biases.

Stereotype Replacement

Stereotype replacement is a visualization practice in which a manager becomes mindful of stereotypes as they arise in their mind and actively replaces them with fact-based positive counterexamples. This practice supports leaders in building alternative mental models around particular identities that over time weaken the hold of stereotypes to reduce unconscious bias.

This tool supported Luis, a manager at a Latin American bank that operates across the Americas, in acknowledging the various stereotypes he had learned about other Latine communities and replacing them

with real-life counterexamples. Stereotype replacement is about actively building new neural habits to weaken the hold of unconscious biases.

Institutionally, Luis brought this practice to his firm's internal communication platform by initiating and inviting his colleagues to share stories of leaders from different Hispanic and Latine ethnicities who shatter stereotypes. These examples eventually became a part of their company's marketing efforts to disrupt ethnicity-based unconscious biases in the communities they serve.

Individuation

Individuation is the practice of dissociating group-based stereotypes from an individual by cultivating curiosity and interest. It supports managers to be open to discover the unique dimensions of their team members as opposed to staying stuck in fixed ideas about them because of their identities, behaviors, or beliefs. At a psychological level, this tool helps overcome the fear and separation that undergird most stereotypes.

A simple way to practice individuation within team contexts is by using three key words: "tell me more." This phrase instills and encourages a nonjudgmental curiosity, especially in instances where there may be a disagreement. It also fosters team-wide understanding and empathy by providing members context to appreciate the reasoning and decision-making process of fellow team members.

Prosocial Behavior

Prosocial behaviors are a set of tools that mitigate unconscious bias by inclining the mind toward positive mental and emotional states, particularly compassion. Unconscious biases are generally made up of false concepts that are accompanied with negative affect and emotions such as fear, uncertainty, or aversion. Prosocial behaviors weaken

and transform such emotions by counterbalancing them with positive mental and emotional states.

Lisa, a senior director at a national nonprofit that operates in over 30 states, instilled this tool in her teams by introducing the practice of “compassion bombing.” In other words, before going into a team or client meeting, her team members take sixty seconds to visualize the people they are about to meet and actively send them compassion through repetition of simple phrases like “may you be happy” or “may you be free from worry and anxiety.” [Studies](#) have shown that such simple practices when done regularly help teams build resilience, courage, and a sense of closeness that is essential to collaboration and conflict resolution.

Perspective-Taking

[Perspective-taking](#) is the ability to put oneself in other people’s shoes and imagine situations from their perspective. It is a radical tool of building empathy and unlearning unconscious biases because it humanizes people by inviting teams to see and feel through different viewpoints and lived experiences.

Raj, a producer at a content marketing firm, when workshopping visual concepts routinely invites his team to share their perspectives from the lens of different consumer demographics. This process helps him foster and integrate ideas from the creatives on his team while reducing the risk of stereotyping. [Research](#) demonstrates that perspective-taking helps teams generate more innovative ideas and learn new skills, such as unlearning unconscious bias, more easily.

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In the face of DEI backlash, incorporating PRISM tools within workplaces provide leaders and managers the opportunity to fulfill the promises of DEI — strengthening trust, understanding, creativity, and

safety to enhance bottom-line performance and reduce wasted costs in the process.

Behavioral scientists have found that with daily practice new habits can be built in as little as 18 days. With PRISM tools, businesses have the unprecedented opportunity to lead their diverse teams differently and combat unconscious biases, the root cause of most DEI challenges.

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