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Charlottesville: A Clarifying Moment About Unconscious Bias

Diversity

President Trump's statements in the aftermath of the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville have presented an opportunity to have a long overdue national conversation about race, diversity, bias and inclusion. It is not appropriate or true to imply that most Americans are filled with the rage and resentment that was displayed recently in Charlottesville. However, Susan Brooks, Principal with T. H. Easter Consulting, says in the Bloomberg Law Insights report that it is appropriate and true to suggest that most of us have biases, both conscious and unconscious, that have a potentially negative impact on the lives of others.

These kinds of biases are insidious and damaging, and their presence in the workplace has far reaching effects on the fabric of our society. Leaders in any organization have a heightened responsibility to be aware of and acknowledge these biases, both institutional and cultural, and make sincere efforts to ensure they are not unwittingly reinforced.

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The president is doing us all a YUGE favor.

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His statements in the aftermath of the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville have presented an opportunity to have a long overdue national conversation about race, diversity, bias and inclusion. What has been simmering under the surface since the passage of the Civil Rights Act is now out in the open for everyone to see and reflect upon. The United States has yet to address what has been called its "original sin": slavery and its aftermath. There have been no Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, no Nuremberg trials to address our profound moral failure. And unfortunately, this president has given people much more than tacit permission to express their hate and grievance in ways that have become impossible to ignore.

It is not appropriate or true to imply that most Americans are filled with the rage and resentment that was displayed recently in Charlottesville. However, it is appropriate and true to suggest that most of us have biases, both conscious and unconscious, that have a potentially negative impact on the lives of others. These biases reveal themselves in ways large and small—through the actions of law enforcement and presumptions of guilt based on skin color, i.e., "driving while black," to more seemingly benign expressions of bias,

such as assuming and expecting that women leaders can only succeed in certain types of roles. The true harm of this kind of bias is that it negates the humanity inherent in each of us as individuals, seeing only groups about whom we have preconceived judgments.

These kinds of biases are insidious and damaging, and their presence in the workplace has far reaching effects on the fabric of our society. Leaders in any organization have a heightened responsibility to be aware of and acknowledge these biases, both institutional and cultural, and make sincere efforts to ensure they are not unwittingly reinforced.

What do we mean when we say unconscious bias? These biases are in fact “mental shortcuts based on social norms and stereotypes.” And they are often hidden in plain sight. There have been numerous studies documenting how unconscious bias manifests in workplace decisions. For example, “a Duke University study found that “mature-faced” people had a career advantage over “baby-faced” people (people with large, round eyes, high eyebrows and a small chin). And a Yale University study found that male and female scientists—trained to reject the subjective—were more likely to hire men, rank them higher in competency than women, and pay them \$4,000 more per year than women.” This is not what people generally think of when they think about unconscious bias.

Obviously, unconscious bias has real and frequently negative impacts on people’s career trajectories, income potential and socio-economic progress. If these seemingly benign biases have this kind of effect, what is the potential harm from more overt expressions of bias that our predominantly white culture is not even cognizant of?

In the study referenced above, *The Real Effects of Unconscious Bias in the Workplace*, a few of the known unconscious biases that directly impact the workplace were identified. These include an affinity bias, which is gravitating toward those most like ourselves; the halo effect, which is a tendency to believe only good things about those you like, and the perception bias, a tendency to form stereotypes and assumptions about certain groups that crowd out the ability to make objective judgments about these group members. Who among us is not guilty of at least one of these biases in our daily lives?

Clearly, some reflection is in order. What is happening in your organization that contributes to or reinforces biases? What kinds of expectations do you have for women employees or people of color or individuals with disabilities? Must they be twice as good to get half

as far? Must they “prove” themselves in different ways? Are they insulted by the bigotry of low expectations? Are they expected to carry the “diversity” burden for everyone? Serve as diversity show horses on committees and events?

Donald Trump and Charlottesville need not be a cautionary tale. Rather, it is a signal that it is time to begin the real and hard work of confronting the underbelly of our shared heritage. The “diversity and inclusion” mantra that we have paid lip service to for so long is now front and center. Leaders must lead. Begin the conversations in the workplace. Be courageous enough to hear hard truths from your people. Bring your own biases to the table. Then make sure that everyone feels heard and accepted.

There are no easy solutions. But there will be *no* solutions if we’re unwilling to have the conversation. Business leaders in America, rightly or wrongly, set a tone and an example. As Steven Pearlstein wrote in the *Washington Post* last month, the resignations from the advisory councils are “likely to be looked back upon as a turning point in the evolution of American capitalism — an acknowledgment from some of the nation’s top corporate executives that the single-minded focus on maximizing profits and share prices that has been their mantra for the past three decades is no longer politically viable or morally acceptable.”

The president has given us a tremendous opportunity. And as those who resigned from the president’s Manufacturing Council, Strategy & Policy Forum, and Arts and Humanities Committee demonstrated, when you have a platform to make a difference, it is imperative that it be used. Kenneth Frazier took the lead by resigning first, and while it is almost a certainty that his ethnicity played a role in his actions, others quickly followed, and the president was forced to retroactively “disband” these councils to save face.

Be mindful that words without deeds have no value. A deep dive into an organization’s culture, systems, processes and protocols will reveal institutional biases that were never foreseen. Many companies and organizations have delivered training on unconscious bias. While this is imperative, the training must be tethered to the way your organization actually does things, otherwise it is too easy to slip back into the habits we’ve taken generations to form.

We are at a point where blaming unconscious bias will no longer cut it. A quick glance at each day’s news illustrates the extent to which bias continues to dominate every aspect of our culture. It is long past time to turn the page.