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# RESOLVING UNCONSCIOUS BIAS©

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## THE CRUCIAL ELEMENT FOR CULTURAL INCLUSION

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This publication provides a comprehensive discussion of *unconscious biases* and why their resolution in the workplace and society has become intractable in terms of their elimination. Most attempts are focused on peripheral approaches that only have a minor effect on the *source* of the problem—albeit, still elements toward resolution. This analysis will show what the heart of the problem is and, ultimately, several approaches for resolution. We begin by defining the subject of our discussion: an *unconscious bias is an unconscious perception, belief, or attitude which drives behaviors (mostly unconsciously) that limit the participation, development, and advancement of others—commonly by group (or demographic) identification.*

### **STEP 1. AWARENESS THAT UNCONSCIOUS BIASES EXIST**

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The sequential process of addressing unconscious biases is an outgrowth of diversity and inclusion. The first step in resolution has been involved with what is broadly referred to as “Awareness Building.” The fact that biases between and among co-workers do exist and is a major source of exclusion, limited opportunity for professional development and advancement, and the major barrier to the achievement of an inclusive culture.

Most organizations have achieved and passed this step in the resolution process; motivated, in some cases, by recent in-depth academic studies, and brain and psychology research. The question that naturally followed is “What do we do about it?”

The response, in most cases, has been justification in terms of business implications; more precisely, the loss or gain of monetary income—where the moral implication of inequity is usually secondary, or even ignored in some cases. By moral implications, I mean, “Does an employee ‘inherently deserve’ equitable opportunity, in addition to or in spite of, the business impact?” The answer depends on the practiced values of an organization.

## **STEP 2. AWARENESS OF THE BUSINESS IMPLICATIONS OF UNCONSCIOUS BIASES**

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From a business perspective, unconscious biases can be extremely costly, both at present and into the future. The most obvious is in terms of human capital. Without a feeder system to attract and retain the best talent possible, an organization has no future; and therefore, no sustainability. Other factors that follow naturally include lost productivity from exclusion, cost of attrition and turnover, diminished creativity and innovation, and the inability to adequately serve a diverse, multicultural, and global customer base that is strongly influenced by the values of the Millennial and evolving 2020 Generations. Retention is strongly influenced by organizational climate (inclusion), opportunities for growth and development, and a *democratic* philosophy of leadership and management.

Major objectives of a convincing business case are leadership's personal and monetary commitment to the long term success of diversity and inclusion, and middle management's "buy-in," which is a necessity to address the issues of inequitable opportunities for personal success.

The business implications have been exhaustibly demonstrated by countless organizations. However, in spite of these efforts, I would suggest that a great business case alone will not "carry the day"—although it is an absolute necessity of the sequence.

## **STEP 3. ADDRESSING UNCONSCIOUS BIASES**

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A major step in the sequence are workshops, seminars, and trainings where there is the exploration of specific biases that exist, such as, "women are not committed to their careers," "African Americans are intellectually inferior," "Hispanics are lazy," "Asians are hard workers," but "they don't make good managers (too soft)," "Millennials are only here for a few years," plus "they have no social skills or a committed work ethic." The list goes on and on.

The problem with the initial training interventions is that these biases are considered to be external to people. Therefore, solutions involve externally focused interventions, processes, and behavioral changes. For example, Persons of Color and Women mentoring programs, diverse recruitment teams, diverse candidate pools and succession planning groups, "diversity at all levels," "active Employee Resource Groups, all designed to "fight an invisible enemy!"

Please do not misunderstand me; these activities are **vital** once a transformation in the organization's mind-set has occurred. However, these interventions, in and of themselves, do not directly transform biases or the culture.

The result is "*The more things change, the more they stay the same,*" and employees get frustrated and many from all segments of the population, move on!

## **STEP 4. CONFRONTING UNCONSCIOUS BIASES THROUGH "SPIRITED" DIALOGUE**

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In many cases, the frustration is so great that many organizations engage in "spirited dialogue." This process tends to stir feelings and emotions, and in some cases defensiveness. It can also be used as a reason for the accusation of divisiveness by those who oppose cultural transformation. At this point, we are approaching a critical stage in the resolution process.

This is the stage where we begin to realize that biases are associated with people, not the system. The system is the result of our **collective** mental programming. Some influence and control the organizational mind-set more than others. These tend to dominate. This stage may involve holding managers accountable based upon bonuses or other monetary incentives as a motivation to change. More often than not, the result is the opposite.

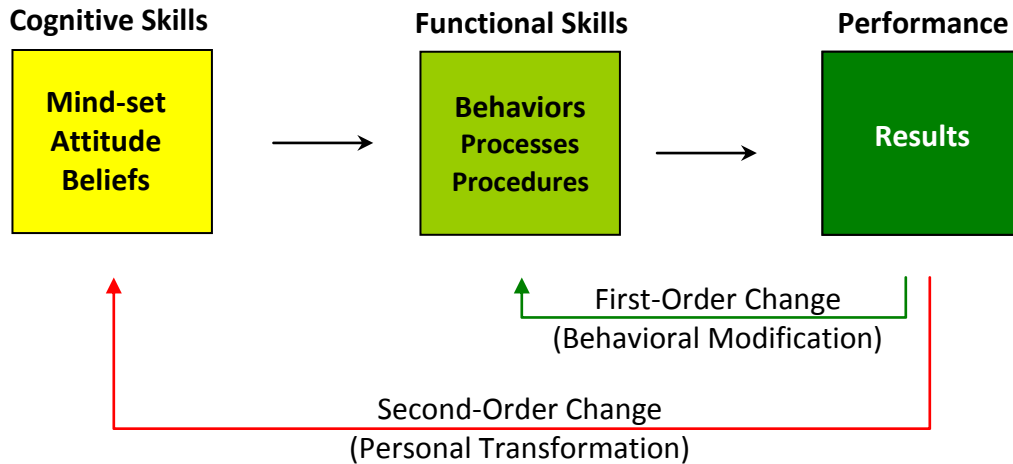
However, this is first time we collectively realize that we are **all** part of the conspiracy! We all have conscious and unconscious biases about and among each other that influence the culture—whether we are aware of them or not. It also becomes clear that employees have a crucial role to play in creating an inclusive culture, and inclusion is not solely the responsibility of leadership and management.

We also begin to realize that a "magic behavioral bullet" approach will not produce lasting results, but do often produce short-term fixes. "Why?" Because we are really attempting create a transformation in Mind-Set that results in a committed change in Behaviors that produces irreversible Results. Then, what's next?

## **STAGE 5. PERSONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL TRANSFORMATION**

We have reached the crucial step in our quest to permanently resolve unconscious biases. This step is captured by the diagram below:

### **STATE OF MIND DIAGRAM**



We must first have second-order change for anything substantive and irreversible to happen. In other words, the Results box depends more on the Mind-Set box for permanent change than does a dominantly behavioral, process, and procedural approach! We have had more than 20 years of the latter and have not produced a single “inclusive organization or culture,” by clear definition and measurement! And we continue to use the approach today!

The solution to second-order change is defined by the Elisabeth Kübler-Ross process in her *Death and Dying* book:

- Denial (Awareness)
- Anger (Challenging Dialogue)
- Bargaining (Business Case)
- Transformation (Skilled Facilitative Coaching)
- Acceptance (Diversity Champion)

This is the process for permanent resolution of an unconscious (or conscious) bias. The most powerful way to create this experience is through “non-casual personal interaction.” These include:

- skillful facilitated transformation in a workshop setting,
- direct human interaction, often job-related, where a goal or a relationship is more important than an individual's attachment to a bias, and
- establishing a challenging goal in the Results box (diagram above) that forces non-comfort-zone Behaviors resulting in a transformation in Mind-Set.

***“Transformation begins at the end  
of your comfort zone.”***

This process is very, very difficult to achieve in an online facilitated training, yet it is possible with an open, receptive, and introspective group since all five steps of the Kübler-Ross process must be experienced.

## **STAGE 6. INFLUENCING OTHERS TO TRANSFORM THEIR THINKING AND CHANGE THEIR BEHAVIORS, PROCESSES, AND PROCEDURES**

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Stage 5 transformation is the essence of a Diversity Champion. It should be acknowledged that there are individuals who have learned Stage 5 through the *workshop of life*: their personal experiences with a variety of differences; their family upbringing; their inherited nature of humanity; or a variety of other ways. I would guess these individuals comprise not more than 5 to 10 % of the Earth's population.

However, these individuals naturally influence others just by their *natural way of being*. They think in inclusive ways. They are naturally sensitive to and understanding of the difficulties that others experience. Most of all, they are transparent.

In truth, they really need very little in the way of training about how to treat others in a decent manner. They realize that living and learning are life-long and do not pretend to be perfect. Perhaps, best of all, they laugh at their own shortcomings and are eager to acquire knowledge and wisdom from others; particularly, where differences provide the greatest opportunity for significant change and learning.

## **STAGE 7. SELF-ACCOUNTABILITY FOR BEING AN AGENT OF TRANSFORMATION**

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Individuals who achieved Stage 7 *live* a *consciousness of compatibility*. They view differences as the *nature* of the human experience. Using differences for exclusion or advantage is incomprehensible to this individual. Therefore, his or her preoccupation is

surveying the rich variety of resources and focusing on how they might be combined to create state-of-the-art, breakthrough solutions, ideas, and vistas. Their natural way of interacting with others, in a totally accepting way, is transforming.

Finally, without conscious awareness, this individual dominantly lives by a code of conduct we describe as *collaboration, empowerment, passion, transparency, trust, and inclusion*. Their preoccupation is focused on assisting others to succeed, because they view their own success as inseparable from the success of others. Most of all, such individuals are all around us, we just rarely notice them because the presently existing dominant consciousness (culture) is so overwhelming.