

SUCCESSFUL PRACTICES TO INTERRUPT BIAS IN THE WORKPLACE

Principles either Adapted or Taken Directly from the University of Washington's Interrupting Bias Publications Supportive of Increased Diversity in Hiring Practices

Prepared for the Ramsey County Blue Ribbon Commission
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Largely, matters pertaining to the hiring and promotion of a diverse workforce are "HR" and "PR" related. In Human Resources (HR), success requires a systematic review of existing policies, practices, and processes related to the search and hiring process. Actions leading to success include the systematic review, modification, and/or adoption of policies, practices, and processes supportive of greater equity. In the hiring process, everything from advertisements to search committees is re-considered and re-imagined to include greater intentionality in decisions made. Also included is the orientation of all employees involved in the hiring and evaluation of applicants. In other words, systemic change in practice helps in holding all stakeholders accountable.

Nonetheless, ultimate achievement of a more diverse workforce requires a cohesive Public Relations (PR) campaign led by conscientious, concerned leaders. These leaders, along with personnel within the workplace who also understand and/or are committed to resolving issues of access and equity, can and often do make a difference in reaching desired results. It is essential in this process to identify those individuals most committed to making change happen and willing to persevere against the odds to be "champions" of workplace equity as policies and procedures are re-examined, modified, and implemented. Orientation for those making hiring decisions and workshops for supervisors, managers, and other employees involved can also assist in making constructive change happen. The key is to establish mechanisms for access and equity to occur.

Mentorship, along with a professional climate of acceptance and respect, can be incredibly supportive of employees continued growth, development, and (as applicable) their promotion.

Once hired, it is critical that employers create a warm, welcoming, and inviting environment for employees that leads to and is supportive of their continued success. For example,

We all like to think we are objective [people]... who judge others solely on their credentials and achievements, but copious research shows that every one of us has a lifetime of experience and cultural history that shapes the review process. To evaluate other people more accurately we need to challenge our implicit hypotheses...we need to become explicitly aware of them. --Virginia Valian

If done well, greater attentiveness to equity in the workplace will infuse stronger integrity and accountability within the hiring, support, and performance review process that will benefit everyone – not just employees of color. If handled with care, sustainable actions can assist all involved to make quality decisions at all levels of the employment strata, including the hiring and support of CEO's and vice presidents who might also be of color. Nonetheless, success requires mindful, conscientious change and strength among those in leadership to *want* the change.

Lessons Learned from Higher Education

There is much to be learned from the success of higher education in addressing equity within its efforts to diversify the professoriate. Situational differences aside, the principles embedded in the search, hiring, and promotion process are applicable to any setting. These global principles therefore hold much promise for the Blue Ribbon Commission in identifying a concrete proposal for helping employers embody sustainable practices leading to significantly different results. For example, the University of Washington's *Interrupting Bias* project includes a comprehensive list of strategies and ideas gleaned from available research about higher education's efforts to recruit and hire diverse employees. In this case, many stakeholders in higher education purport difficulties in finding qualified applicants of color to apply for available positions. Nonetheless, a review of search processes reveals a number of cognitive errors that can potentially prohibit a successful outcome. Intentional mindfulness and the removal of systemic barriers will offset the likelihood that these errors will occur and yield a different outcome. Therefore, by transferring the underlying principles and strategies outlined in the literature and previously identified in higher education, we have a workable framework for supporting employers in all settings with building a more cohesive plan for greater access and equity in the workplace.

Attracting Potential Employees

Among the strategies that found helpful in creating a sizable pool of applicants is the *ongoing recruitment* of employees of color. As employers and their managers and supervisors meet people and make connections within the community, they can develop a cohesive, purposeful grassroots campaign designed to ensure "a constant, steady stream of potential future" employees. Each division or department can also establish a standing committee charged with thinking through the business plan, strategic directions, and additional ways to identify potential employees. This way, as positions become available, the division/department knows

what areas to target and can have a strategy available to contact potential employees.

Additionally, employers can work to *mine various resources for potential employees* and *identify people who can help* make connections. This is where community organizations, state agencies, and higher education (especially two-year institutions) can be of great value in helping employers make critical connections.

Another key strategy is to *grow your own* employees. This is where partnerships with P-12 and higher education can be fruitful in helping employers identify potential employees and provide the support required for their educational needs. Specifically through partnerships, internships, and other activities related to skill-development, degree attainment, and other needs that might lead to continuous improvement, employers can establish a healthy climate of lifelong learning supportive of innovation and flexibility within a dynamic economic climate.

Search Committees

Caroline S. V. Turner's now historic research in higher education revealed three critical practices for successful hiring of employees of color:

1. Establish a search committee with diverse representatives for ensuring that this factor is included within the search process.
2. Express a deep value of diversity within job announcements and at the company/business level.
3. Have a strong advocate for diversity on the search committee or within the search process.

One of the most effective, low-cost strategies is to include language in the job announcement that encourages employees of color to apply. This means expressing more than the customary, required, affirmative action language. Instead, convey a commitment to diversity that will *attract*

applicants of color and let them know that the company or business values diversity in the workplace.

It is also important for the leader (CEO, vice president, and/or manager) to meet with search committees at the beginning of the process to convey the importance of and commitment to diversity.

At the committee level, HR representatives and managers can help search committees discuss intentional ways to actively recruit women and other members of underrepresented groups to participate and document processes. (Where diversity is limited, committees can invite a member of the community who understands and values diversity to be included in the search process.)

It is also important to:

- Reach committee consensus on how qualifications will be weighted in the decision process.
- Interview more than one applicant of color for the position. Research indicates that doing so increases the likelihood of hiring a woman and member of an underrepresented group when this occurs.
- Avoid narrowing the search to one specific area of expertise. Cast a broad net to increase diversity within the applicant pool.
- Maintain personal contact with prospective applicants, even if they decide not to accept the position. They might be interested in the future.
- Customize the interview process for each applicant. Ask the prospective employee whom they would like to meet with during the visit. Provide opportunities for them to meet others who might become a part of their work within the business. Identifying and being a full member of a community is important for all employees and is particularly important for those from underrepresented groups.

Common Biases and Assumptions that Influence Hiring

Within the hiring process there are a few common biases and assumptions noted in the literature that often derail efforts for greater equity within the workplace. Among these are the following:

- Unexamined beliefs and unsupported claims that minorities are somehow not as knowledgeable, skilled, or experienced. Once hired in majority workplace environments, minorities (regardless of position held) must struggle to overcome hidden, unexamined presumptions that they are incompetent. This additional stressor can affect their health and hinder both performance and progress towards promotion.
- Women and underrepresented employees are frequently subject to different expectations than majority candidates. Thus those that are both women *and* underrepresented are more likely to face the greatest scrutiny in the workplace.
- Employees with degrees from institutions and work experiences other than those recognized by majority members might be undervalued in the hiring and promotion process.
- Unexamined assumptions about whether female or minority applicants will “fit in” to the existing workplace can harbor bias and negatively impact fairness and equity within the hiring process.

Common Cognitive Errors in the Hiring and Performance Assessment Process

Jo Ann Moody, J.D., Ph.D., identified several “short cuts” that are often infused in the search process that can “lead to biased assessments in evaluation if we are not motivated to avoid them and skilled in doing so.” Moody noted that “these shortcuts can lead to erroneous conclusions that underrepresented candidates are unqualified or a bad fit.” Among the most common, easily recognizable shortcuts are the following:

- *Cloning* – Replicating oneself by hiring someone with similar attributes or background. Also refers to undervaluing an applicant's experience because it is not familiar, as well as expecting applicants to resemble someone whom the business or company is replacing. Cloning limits the scope and breadth of *approaches and perspectives* in research, teaching and service.
- *Snap Judgments* – Making judgments about the applicant with insufficient evidence. Dismissing an applicant for minor reasons or labeling an applicant "the best" and ignoring positive attributes of the other candidates. Having a covert agenda furthered by stressing something trivial or focusing on a few negatives rather than the overall qualifications. Often occurs when the hiring process feels rushed.
- *Good Fit/Bad Fit* – While it may be about whether the person can meet the programmatic needs for the position, it often is about how comfortable and culturally "at ease" one feels.
- *Negative Stereotypes* – Characterized by presumptions of incompetence. The work of women and underrepresented minorities is scrutinized much more than majority employees, at all stages of their career.
- *Positive Stereotypes* – Dominant group members are automatically presumed to be competent. Such a member receives the benefit of the doubt, negative attributes are glossed over and success is assumed. Also called the "original affirmative action" because dominant group members are automatically presumed qualified and thereby given an unearned advantage.
- *Elitist Behavior* (also called "Raising-the-Bar") – Increasing required qualifications for women and minority applicants because their competency doesn't strike decisions members as trustworthy. Downgrading the qualifications of women and minorities, based on accent, dress, and demeanor. In short, uneven expectations based on a candidate's social identity.
- *Wishful Thinking* – Insisting racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice no longer exist.
- *Euphemized Bias*:
 - *Visionary*: Members of dominant groups are evaluated based on their potential whereas underrepresented groups are judged on their accomplishments and their track record only. For example: "He has vision" or "She lacks vision."
 - *Star*: Used when the speaker is an infatuated fan of the employee under consideration. When you hear it, ask the speaker to explain their use of the term and support it with evidence. For example: "She's not a star" or "It's clear he's a rock star."
 - *Committed, single-minded focus or hard-worker*: These terms could be cloaking a bias against care-givers, those employees who cannot depend on what Williams (2000) calls a "flow of family work" which allows ideal workers to log long hours in the office while still having their material needs met.

Benefits of Diversity

The idea that diversity benefits only people of color is a misnomer. Researchers (e.g., Page 2007) clearly indicate that greater diversity within the workplace increases productivity and the likelihood of innovation among teams. Simply by looking at issues from different perspectives, leaders from across sectors can facilitate problem-solving and improve the overall quality of thought in the decision-making process. The ideas herein are therefore applicable to any workplace setting. From corporations to small businesses; from education to government or the legal system, the principles outlined are economically, socially, and politically beneficial.

Perhaps the most compelling reason for business owners and corporations to address diversity is that focused efforts can lead to greater innovation, accuracy in performance assessment, and enhanced productivity that can facilitate entrepreneurship supportive of the bottom line. Moreover, money used for professional development and retention of a qualified, skilled labor force will more likely yield sustainable results. Intentional efforts will also inspire a stronger respect for difference, enhance professionalism, and create a more harmonious and inviting workplace for

employees. Companies will more likely attract top applicants as they become known as a place where all employees *want* to be.

Nonetheless, there is greater success in these efforts when company executives and leaders hold themselves and others accountable for supporting this type of work. Being cognizant of the common pitfalls and cognitive errors noted in the literature can lead to greater mindfulness in reaching success. Knowing, for example, that the name of a qualified, experienced applicant can deter their ability to be hired (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004) is useful when working with HR directors, managers, and search committees. Likewise, knowing that males are more likely to be rated higher than women during the hiring process can assist leaders with recognizing the powerful interaction of gender and race/ethnicity when making decisions (Steinpreis, Anders, & Ritzke, 1999). Regardless, by being conscious of the possibility of bias, leaders will increase their capacity for creating constructive, sustainable change in addressing the needs of all employees.

Summary

While the task of ensuring access and equity within the workplace can be daunting, it is nevertheless achievable with greater intentionality and purposeful decision-making within the recruitment, hiring, performance assessment, and promotion process. Common practices successful in higher education can be easily incorporated into other workplace settings and are therefore transferable. By capitalizing on these practices and being aware of potential cognitive errors, employers can successfully interrupt bias and increase the likelihood of a greater and more diverse workforce, one welcoming for all. Lastly, the principles outlined apply to all underrepresented groups and are not limited to people of color. If applied with integrity, employers can move closer to creating a more harmonious and welcoming environment for employees, regardless of background. More importantly, it is the right thing to do for the right reasons.

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