Deal with bias and discrimination

How to get your head out of the sand & why it’s important
Dealing with bias and discrimination

In this information bulletin, I’d like to highlight how we often deal with bias and discrimination and some strategies we and our organisations can embrace to recognise and take action against this. This bulletin draws in part on the work of the AHRC Leading for Change blueprint.

I’d like to start by making it OK for us all to embrace the fact that no-one is free from bias or prejudice. Human judgment is not formed exclusively through reason. Experience and perception also play a role. The beliefs we hold however influences how we see the world around us. And the reality is how we see it differs greatly!

Within organisations however this difference, may sometimes lead to discrimination. Some people may be treated differently because of their background – whether it is an unearned benefit or a disadvantage. People’s beliefs can and do shape their assessment about others’ performance and potential.

This can be true even of the very idea of ‘merit’ itself. Our ideas about who is most meritorious can be determined by highly subjective criteria, often without us realising.

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Prejudice is a chain, it can hold you. If you prejudice, you can't move, you keep prejudice for years. Never get nowhere with that.

— Bob Marley —

Our judgements about leadership may be particularly susceptible to bias. When it concerns advancement within professional life, prejudice can trump diversity. This can be the case even when organisations have fully accepted the idea of inclusion with all the right intentions. Jane Hyun, a leadership strategist believes, this is because ‘the
selection criteria as you reach higher rungs on the ladder become more subjective and less firmly based on technical abilities’.i

Certainly, the idea of leadership is bound up in elusive notions of charisma and authority, which open the way to bias. Often such biases concern physical attributes.

A considerable amount of research has found, for example, a correlation between being tall and attaining managerial positions.ii Other research indicates that attractiveness may also be a strong predictor of decisions about who is put in a position of leadership.iii

This illustrates the clear limits to our cognitive ability. Psychologists refer to the ‘halo effect’: having positive feelings about the overall impression of a person may influence our assessment of their character or ability. Where we have a positive first impression of someone, we will tend to believe that everything else about them is positive. There can also be a ‘reverse halo effect’: a negative first impression of someone means we will tend to be negative about everything else about them.iv

In leadership, bias and discrimination is of concern. Namely, prevailing models of leadership may have built into them assumptions that privilege some and disadvantage others. The ‘image’ people have of leadership matters.

This can play out in a number of ways.

Regarding race; in the United States, sociologists studying the ‘power elite’ have observed that many of the African-American men and women in positions of power seemed to have ‘very light skin tone’ or were perceived as ‘non-threatening’. It was found that, ‘the less different people were from the white male norm that was dominant in the power elite, the more likely they were to be deemed acceptable’.v

For other groups, bias and discrimination may focus not so much on skin colour but on cultural traits associated with one’s ethnicity. This has been the focus of much of the commentary concerning the ‘bamboo ceiling’ – namely, the barriers that those of Asian backgrounds face in professional workplaces dominated by Anglo and Western norms.vi

To some extent, this is due to stereotypes about those from Asian backgrounds being self-effacing, quiet, even submissive. Some of these stereotypes may reflect certain dispositions associated with Asian cultures. In highly individualistic societies, those who speak or shout the loudest get noticed the most or rewarded: ‘The squeaky wheel gets the grease.’ Yet, within Asian cultures, a different norm may prevail: ‘The loudest duck gets shot’.vii
This appears to be a live issue within Australian organisations. A survey into Asian-background talent conducted by Diversity Council Australia highlighted that only 18 per cent of Asian background workers surveyed felt their workplaces were free of biases and stereotypes about culture. About 61 per cent reported feeling pressure to conform to ‘Anglo’ styles of leadership, which emphasise self-promotion and assertiveness.

Remedying bias and discrimination is not easy. First, it can be difficult to identify. Prejudice is often something that is not consciously practised; unconscious bias can be difficult to disentangle from the ordinary course of business. Second, those who experience bias may well be experiencing it on multiple dimensions. In the case of women of culturally diverse backgrounds, being both a woman and a cultural minority may involve a ‘double whammy’ effect.

Bringing up the topic can also be met with resistance. No one, of course, likes to believe that they engage in prejudice or discrimination. Moreover, those who pursue diversity can often find their colleagues will protest that it may end up ‘lowering the bar’.

This highlights a particular issue in dealing with bias in the form of ‘attribution error’. Where people are not accustomed to expecting leadership or positive performance from a particular group, they may attribute any success to luck or ‘affirmative action’. This, in turn, may make it harder for diverse talent to find sponsors within their organisation to help advance their progress. An example, I unfortunately heard from a disgruntled man overlooked for a new role, was that a successful woman’s promotion was attributed to a gender balance initiative rather than for being the best person for the role, despite her obvious talent.

Table 1: ‘Cultural' behaviours of professionals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behaviour</th>
<th>Observation (from others)</th>
<th>Assessment (by others)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respect and deference to seniority</td>
<td>Unwilling to challenge</td>
<td>Lacking independence and personal strength</td>
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<tr>
<td>Possessing self-control (speaking only when spoken to)</td>
<td>Unable to speak out or contribute ideas</td>
<td>Lacking in communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being loath to boast</td>
<td>Inhibited in selling one’s achievements</td>
<td>Lacking in flair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close attention to detail</td>
<td>Incapable of seeing the big picture</td>
<td>Lacking in perspective</td>
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Countering bias and discrimination requires more than just consciousness raising. Rather, any training program must also present people with strategies to eliminate bias and apply them in their daily work.

In addition to taking the perspective of others, training should seek to promote contact with those who are different. How can a 6 foot 2 white male really understand the bias a 5 foot 3 Asian woman feels unless he really seeks to learn from her and see the world through her lens? Similarly there is no better way for an able-bodied person to gain a whole new perspective of physical disability than spending a day in a wheel chair.

It follows, the best approach seems to be one that transforms people’s experience. Research studies have indicated that unconscious racial bias was most effectively reduced where people listened to stories that involved ‘high self-involvement’ – for example, scenarios that prompted people to ask themselves if they would react differently to a person if they belonged to a different race.

Bias can be eliminated through effort.*

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**Case study – one organisation being proactive in reducing bias**

**Telstra’s ‘Bias Interrupted’ Program**

‘Bias Interrupted’ was designed to improve Telstra leaders’ understanding of bias, and of how inclusive leadership can enable high performance and innovation. The program explores biases and how to challenge them; how to value uniqueness and foster belonging to enable inclusion and innovation; and how leaders can create safe environments so that Telstra people perform at their best.

The program also explores concepts of ‘Otherness’, ‘Covering’, Bias and Inclusive Leadership practice. Its content focuses on practices such as recruitment, flexibility, leading teams, talent identification and development, performance planning and review activities. It identifies key areas of decision-making where leaders and teams can benefit from an enhanced focus on inclusion.

‘Bias Interrupted’ explores these dynamics as they relate to cultural identity, disability, gender, flexibility, sexual orientation and gender identity, age, intercultural understanding/global mindset.
Ideas to cultivate diverse leaders

There are numerous ways organisations can focus their effort on professional development for cultural diversity and inclusive leadership, below are four.

First, organisations can actively identify staff from culturally diverse backgrounds who display leadership potential. Recognising emergent leadership can become something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Not everyone may enjoy the same access to such paths. Often this is because existing leaders unconsciously seek to reproduce the same style of leadership with people from the same socio-economic, gender or cultural background.

When you review your leadership pipeline, does it reflect the diversity balance your organisation wants? If not, What action do you need to take to rectify this?

Second, there is mentorship and sponsorship. Technical skill and mastery can only take someone so far; one must also know some of the unwritten rules within an organisation or industry. Those who seek career advancement require mentors and sponsors – trusted advisors who can give assistance, make introductions to contacts, and act as one’s advocates. For many from culturally diverse backgrounds, or for women realising this reality sadly comes too late. This may be especially the case where people feel asking for assistance is regarded as a sign of weakness.

Do you have a formal mentor program that reflects diversity? If not, what do you need to change to get the result you want? Do your leaders informally mentor a diverse range of people or do they mentor people like them? Is there an opportunity to be more inclusive of a diverse range of people?

Third, organisations can empower their culturally diverse or minority talent to speak up and stand out. Speaking up does not come naturally to all; it comes much harder to some people from certain backgrounds. It is not uncommon for women or those of culturally diverse backgrounds to be relatively anonymous within an organisation. Having a high profile may seem to be the exception, even among minority employees who are high-performing.

Often, however, visibility is a prerequisite of advancement. Those who want to be considered for leadership roles may need to consider being recognised within their organisation: it is not enough to do a job well, but one must also be seen to be doing a job well. Such things can be taught or coached. But they may come easier when there is also a culture of professional development.

Do your high potential minorities have coaching to help develop their confidence and build their brand? What are you doing to encourage visibility?
Case study
Scholarships for Cultural Diversity

In 2015, the Australian Institute of Company Directors (AICD) and the Minister assisting the Prime Minister for Women, Senator the Hon Michaelia Cash, launched a new Cultural Diversity Scholarship Program for talented women who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander or who come from a culturally and linguistically diverse background. Fifty-five scholarships were offered and jointly funded by the Federal Government and the AICD and were available to senior executives and existing female directors.

One way of promoting diversity and inclusion is through the use of networks – the fourth aspect of professional development. While many Australian organisations have existing staff networks, there remains considerable potential for growing their value. Too often, the activity of such networks is confined to celebrating diversity; they are too often about festivities rather than about professional development.

Whether they are affinity groups, or advocacy groups, networks can provide an important forum for diverse talent. They ‘can be a critical tool for breaking down stereotypes at your company and for unified communications with the CEO and members of the senior management team’.

More than this, they help to expand employees’ contacts or provide people with support. It can be valuable for someone to find others who have shared experiences – something that can assist in giving people a greater sense of self-confidence.

What could you do to create connections through development in your organisation? What could you start, continue, expand or build on?

Case Study Standing up

It is challenging and could potentially be career suicide for any minority to stand up to their boss and call out bias, whether gender or race, however if your boss is open to learning and truly on board with diversity and inclusion, it can be a gift for them and the organisation.

Some years ago, as an up-and-coming African-American leader at health care provider Kaiser Permanente, Bernard Tyson had an awkward conversation with a senior white senior executive. The executive told Tyson, ‘I don’t see you as a black man. I see you as a smart individual.’

While Tyson was pleased this Kaiser Senior Exec acknowledged his intelligence, he was disappointed the senior leader dismissed an essential part of who Tyson is: a black, African-American man. ‘I was insulted,’ Tyson recalls. ‘He insulted my heritage.’

‘Wait,’ Tyson said. ‘I am a black man!’ He paused and explained to this high-ranking executive that it was important to see the value Tyson’s race and heritage bring to the workplace – the value all black employees bring, precisely because the lens of race gives them a different perspective.
Tyson’s bold stand paid off. The conversation led to an all-day retreat with a diversity facilitator, who helped Kaiser managers learn to leverage the totality of people on their teams.

Today, Tyson has risen to Chairman and CEO of Kaiser Permanente. The US$56 billion health care provider employs a diverse workforce of 175,000, nearly 60 per cent of which are ethnic minorities and 13 per cent are African-American. About 42 per cent of the members of the leadership team are non-white and 25 per cent are African-American; 17 per cent of the leadership team is female.

"We won't unlock opportunities for young women and girls unless we can change the mindset of every family and community. To achieve this, it cannot just be women who speak up for girls."

For our organisations to survive and thrive in the 21st Century we need to embrace diversity, to truly see the value of inclusion for everyone. Those in power need to realise embracing diversity doesn’t diminish their power by moving away from homogeneity but in fact it enhances their power base by better reflecting and building on the skills & knowledge of the wider population.
Demographic Facts

The mix of overseas-born residents is changing

About 28.5% of Australia’s population was born overseas. People born in the United Kingdom are still the biggest group of overseas-born residents, making up 5% of Australia’s population. That picture is changing however, as the chart below shows.

The share of UK-born residents in Australia is declining, and the proportion of people born in New Zealand has grown over the last decade. Over the same period, the share of China-born and India-born residents has increased.

Australia’s India-born resident population remain predominantly male (119 males per 100 females in 2016), although not as heavily so as previously.

In contrast to China’s male-dominated population back home, among the China-born residents in Australia females are increasingly outnumbering males (just 80 males per 100 females in 2016).

The age demographic is also changing. As shown over the page.
Workplace Diversity Facts

According to CEB, diverse and inclusive workforces demonstrate

- 12 percent more discretionary effort,
- 19 percent greater intent to stay,
- 57 percent more collaboration among teams, and
- 42 percent greater team commitment.

Boston Consulting Group suggests diverse companies outperform homogeneous ones. One study showed that a 1 percent increase in gender diversity correlates with a 3 percent gain in revenue, while a 1 percent increase in racial diversity correlates with a 9 percent gain in revenue. Diverse companies have better reputations — and by bringing together different points of view, they are also more innovative — than less diverse companies.
For you to lead and grow a business, advance in your career, or keep ahead of the change & disruption curve, embracing diversity and creating cultures of inclusion is vital. At Selection Partners, we strongly believe that what got many organisations where they are today, will not get them where they want to be in the future. We know that with almost full employment in Australia, good people are hard to find and retain. Good people can choose where they work. Good people come in all forms, so let’s all see beyond a name on a CV or a qualification obtained overseas. We encourage everyone to see beyond the colour of someone’s skin or their gender, to see the value and perspective they may bring.

Change happens from the top down, amongst middle managers and from employees on the ground. For organisations to benefit from diversity, people need to change. For some embracing diversity can be challenging and at times confronting. It can highlight our own bias and moves us way out of our comfort zone. Sometimes change takes courage and taking a stand for what’s right. We feel embracing difference is an opportunity to learn, to champion change is what will help all employees feel valued and appreciated. Prejudice is learned, isn’t it time we all learnt a new way of being and behaving that benefits us all?

Written by June Parker. June is an executive and career coach. She works with Executive and Senior Managers helping them develop within their roles to achieve performance success and personal satisfaction. She co-founded Selection Partners and is the former President, now VP of EEON, Equal Employment Opportunities Network. June is passionate about diversity and inclusion and works sensitively to surface the unspoken often unconscious and make it safe to recognise and change. You can contact June on june@selectionpartners.com.au
About Selection Partners

Selection Partners is a talent consulting firm. We work with organisations and individuals through all areas of their careers via our four service areas:

- **Attract**: Helping organisations attract and recruit new employees,
- **Change**: Helping individuals & organisations adapt to change,
- **Develop**: Developing people through coaching and training or
- **Transition**: Helping individuals transition into a new role or out of the organisation

Our approach is to partner with organisations to help them achieve their objectives. We work hard on being agile and flexible in what we do, still ensuring quality and systems and accountability measures are in place.


