**Unconscious Bias and Diversity, Equity & Inclusion**

**Unconscious Bias vs. Racism**

According to Merriam-Webster, racism is defined as “a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race”. Simplified, racism is a prejudice against a group of people based on their ethnic group. Typically, a person that has a strong prejudice towards one or more groups is aware of their bias and believes their race is superior. They generally dislike members of the group that they consider inferior.

Unconscious bias is a little different. The person may not have a strong or intentional prejudice towards another person or feel their race is superior; instead, their thoughts and actions reflect an outlook that is based on their own past experiences, media representations, information from their own cultural background or from people they admire.

Unconscious bias is unintentional, and it is based on associating people with groups versus seeing them completely as individuals. Our brain processes information quickly by simplifying it. It automatically categorizes people based, for example, on whether they look and act like us. This is an example of affinity bias. Affinity bias causes us to respond to people who look, act and sound like us differently than we would someone who does not “fit” into that group. It makes you naturally suspicious and unaccepting of the “other”.

Your brain also makes assumptions about groups of people based on past experience. While you may see everyone who is similar to you as individuals because you have wide and varied experiences with people similar to you, you may see others as representative of their type. This is a natural feature of our brains which allows us to make assumptions like “that last snake bit me; I will avoid snakes from now on.”

For example, if a minority stole something from you, your unconscious brain will automatically assume that all people of that ethnic group are prone to stealing. Or say you grew up having all white female teachers in school, your unconscious brain will automatically assume that all teachers are white females.

Your unconscious brain processes things based on what you have seen, heard or experienced in your life. Often this shortcut is useful for us, for example when avoiding venomous snakes. On the other hand, we do not want it to cause us to make unconscious assumptions about others based on their race or gender.

Can you overcome this process? Sure, but it takes some education on your part about what unconscious bias is and how it may have impacted you. From there you will need to intentionally build inclusive habits based on those biases and make efforts to notice information that contradicts your biases. This means developing relationships with people who are not like you, and reminding yourself when you see so-called “typical” behavior of the alternate examples. Many of your employees most likely have some form of unconscious bias; therefore, education and intentionally seeing others as individuals can go a long way in altering this mindset. Simply acknowledging your biases allows you to take actions intentionally instead of emotionally.

**Multi-dimensional & Multi-generational perspectives**

Every person has their own perspective on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion programs in their personal or professional experiences. Each individual may value some aspects of DE & I but may have negative or misinformed ideas as to other aspects. People who perceive DE & I as “Affirmative Action” which promotes people based on race, thereby “discriminating” against men or white people would be one common example. Other people may see diversity as solely a race-based initiative, unaware that diversity is a broader picture. There may also be people who see DE & I as “window-dressing” which will accomplish nothing.

Most organizations now have employees from all five of the generational eras – Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation Xers, Millennials and Generation Zs or Gen2020; therefore, thoughts on DE & I may vary widely in the organization. Everyone in these groups will have differing values and beliefs. However, diversity is what we need in order to spur innovation and productivity and be a leader in the industry.

Provide employees information on the success rates of companies who adopt these initiatives. Explain that creating a diverse company includes encouraging and supporting diversity in opinion and background. A company which is uniform is unable to react to changes in their customer based or understand their needs (whether the customer is internal or external).

Companies must find their own way towards a successful DE & I program. The first step in this is analyzing your current position. Part of this may be metrics, but another important part of the process is talking to your current employees. Organizations needs to take advantage not only of racial and gender diversity, but also listen to the different generations in the workplace and hear from them what they think and feel about DE & I and its importance.

While we cannot dive into the types of discussions that may arise related to DE & I, it is important for organizations to do just that. Hear from your employees (all employees) and see what DE & I means from to them. What supports do they believe will be the most benefit to them? In this way you will be able to craft a dynamic program that could be accepted by all.

DE & I efforts must integrate these diverse needs and ideas and then address those needs across a variety of organizational programs. This must go beyond having a DE & I statement on your website and instead must truly incorporate those initiatives into your organizational practices. For example, recruitment is generally an area of focus with DE & I. After all, if you do not have a diverse group of employees, initiatives to promote diversity are irrelevant. Recruitment strategies to include applicants from a diverse population are likely needed, as well as hiring practices which include a diverse set of interviewers and which, perhaps, include anonymized applications.

For your current employees, creating opportunities for your employee base to participate in meaningful projects, ensuring that focus groups and committees include people of all different backgrounds, or creating pathways for “non-traditional candidates” to move into decision-making positions are all helpful.  Essentially, including DE & I in recruiting, training and development, process management, and other operational aspects is an important process to achieving DE & I success.