

## Surfacing Implicit Bias Towards More Intentional Leadership Development

Our unconscious minds cannot be trusted to deliver accurate information to our consciousness, thereby affecting the way we make decisions, and ultimately how we treat others and ourselves. Without practicing awareness and mindfulness at work and in our private lives, we could be inhibiting the leadership development and advancement of others. To be sure, implicit gender and racial bias is permeating our organizations and societies. However, it is possible to surface these biases and become more intentional about diversity and inclusion in our workplaces.

### THEORY

#### Implicit Bias and the Unconscious Mind

Scientific research has demonstrated that all humans operate under the influence of biases that have shaped the way we think. These biases have come to us from past experiences, cultural influences, and our environment. They are neither “good”

*Understanding how mindbugs erode the coastline of rational thought, and ultimately the very possibility of a just and productive society, requires understanding the mindbugs that are at the root of the disparity between our inner minds and outward actions.*

-Anthony G Greenwald and Mahzarin R. Banaji,  
*Blindspot*

nor “bad”, but they are hidden, deep within our unconscious mind. They affect the way we make decisions, especially when reacting quickly or automatically to a situation. We most likely are not aware of them. Two of the most prominent researchers in this field, Anthony G. Greenwald and Mahzarin R. Banaji, refer to them as “mindbugs” and describe them as being responsible for errors in our perceptions and decisions (Greenwald and Banaji 2013, 4).

#### What’s Happening in the Unconscious Mind?

In their groundbreaking book, “Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People”, Greenwald and Banaji unpack what is happening in the unconscious mind that leads to these errors and misperceptions. Firstly, it is important to note that the mind is operating mostly on an automatic setting, depending on previous experience to function more

effectively and efficiently. Second, the mind is unreliable when it comes to recalling memories. They describe the work of Elizabeth Loftus, who has discovered the memories of eyewitnesses (of a crime or accident) can be altered just by how they are questioned (Greenwald and Banaji 2013, 10). Third, the mind uses the first piece of information it has acquired to make sense of a situation and form judgements. This is called “anchoring”. Greenwald and Banaji conclude that we are essentially making decisions “under conditions of less than perfect knowledge” (Greenwald and Banaji 2013, 15-16).

### **The Social Animal's Unconscious Mind**

Our unconscious mind is at work as we interpret the world, make snap judgments about others, and ultimately make decisions based on those judgments. Such snap judgments and assumptions are more commonly known as stereotypes, when we attach characteristics to strangers based on the group to which they appear to belong. In the workplace, women who act assertively are often described as “bossy”, whereas men who act similarly are labeled as “leaders”. Another assumption often made in our society is that women and girls do not have an aptitude for math or science, and are not encouraged to pursue such studies or careers. As social creatures, we are tapping into these biases, unbeknownst to us, when we interact with others. These biases affect how we treat others, especially those we perceive as different. They may also affect how we see and treat ourselves (Greenwald and Banaji 2013, 18).

### **Biases in the Workplace**

Biases show up in the workplace in a variety of ways, influencing the way in which an organization manages its leadership development practices. There is no denying the data demonstrating the small percentage of women in top leadership roles in corporate America. According to the Calvert Diversity Report of 2013, only 19% of board of director positions are filled by women within the S&P100. A mere 8% of women represent the highest-paid positions within those companies. Meanwhile, a paltry five of these companies are led by female CEOs (DeGroot, Mohapatra and Lippman 2013, 16). Indeed, women are promoted at slower rates than men. The Catalyst 2010 report “The Promise of Future Leadership: A Research Program on Highly Talented

Employees in the Pipeline” uncovered that women significantly lag behind men when it comes to career advancement. To be sure, organizations should be intentional about who is included in informal and formal leadership development. These questions must be addressed:

- ◆ Which employees are encouraged to take on stretch assignments, and which ones are overlooked?
- ◆ Who is benefitting from mentorship and/or coaching?
- ◆ Whose ideas are being recognized and rewarded? Who is being supported by upper management?
- ◆ How are performance reviews handled? Has the possibility of rater bias been accounted for?
- ◆ What assumptions are being made about which qualities make a good leader?

### **What Makes a Good Leader?**

(Testing our assumptions)

In 2004, Daniel Goleman published “What Makes a Leader” in the *Harvard Business Review*, drawing on the conclusions he reached in his game-changing 1995 book, *Emotional Intelligence*. This widely popular essay debunked many of the myths associated with strong leadership, i.e. that “intelligence, toughness, determination, and vision” are necessary for organizational success. Indeed, Goleman has been championing such “soft” qualities traditionally associated with a so-called female style of leadership. However, leadership is more about motivating people to do their best work, rather than just captaining a ship. Herewith are the 5 components of an emotionally intelligent leader:

Self-awareness	Ability to recognize one’s own moods and emotions and their effects on others.
Self-regulation	Ability to control one’s own moods and emotions.
Motivation	Ability to pursue one’s work beyond the goals of money or status.
Empathy	Ability to understand and relate to the emotions of others.
Social skill	Ability to build and manage relationships with others.

Credit: Goleman, Daniel. 2004. “What Makes a Leader?”. *Harvard Business Review*. January 2004.

## PRACTICE

### Surfacing Bias

In order to address one's own implicit biases, it is critical to first surface these biases. This can be accomplished by taking the Implicit Association Test (IAT), developed by the three scientists of Project Implicit (Tony Greenwald, Mahzarin Banaji, and Brian Nosek). The test can be taken for free online at: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>. The IAT is designed to test one's preferences for a variety of social attitudes: race, gender, age, and sexual orientation. The results of the test will indicate whether the test taker shows a preference for a certain group of people over another group of people (i.e. a preference for Whites over Blacks). The IAT brings to light our unconscious associations. It is important to distinguish that the Race IAT uncovers "predicted racially discriminatory behavior" (Greenwald and Banaji 2013, 49) but does not measure "overtly racially hostile actions" (Greenwald and Banaji 2013, 52). These tests uncover attitudes we may not be aware of, and quite possibly inconsistent with our conscious and stated values. (Gladwell 2005, 85).

### De-Biasing

*The broad theme of [Kahneman's] research is that human beings are intuitive thinkers and that human intuition is imperfect, with the result that judgments and choices often deviate substantially from the predictions of normative statistical and economic models. (p. 1080)*

- Andrei Shleifer, 2012

Is it possible to counteract the automatic brain? The short answer is "yes". Daniel Kahneman's best-selling, award-winning book "Thinking, Fast and Slow", puts forth the notion that we have the capabilities to slow down our thinking and avoid making common decision-making errors. Kahneman describes two modes of thought happening in our brain: System 1 - the

automatic, fast thinking, instinctual process; and System 2 - the slower, more logical process, which monitors System 1 (Kahneman 2011, 408). It is possible to block these System 1 errors by slowing down, "recognizing the signs that you are in a cognitive minefield" and turning to System 2 for help (Kahneman 2011, 417). By practicing awareness (System 2), one can circumvent snap judgements and jumping to conclusions.

## **Mindfulness**

One way to counteract the automatic brain is through the practice of mindfulness, whereby an individual brings their attention fully to the present and achieves focus. Nicole E. Ruedy and Maurice E. Schweitzer studied the effects of mindfulness on the ability of executives to make more ethical decisions and reported a positive relationship (Ruedy and Schweitzer 2010, 73). They describe mindfulness as the process by which one is aware of both one's own thoughts and the external environment (Ruedy and Schweitzer 2010, 73). Individuals who are mindful are able to observe their thoughts with enough distance that they transcend judgment and negative thoughts and feelings (Ruedy and Schweitzer 2010, 76). Generally, the practice of mindfulness is achieved through a form of meditation, in which one practices deep breathing techniques while turning one's attention inward, simultaneously aware of one's external environment. Ultimately, the ability to self-reflect leads to greater self-awareness, as well as a higher tolerance for discomfort and greater empathic abilities (Ruedy and Schweitzer 2010, 76).

## **Towards More Intentional Leadership Development**

Individuals and organizations can transcend implicit bias and move toward more intentional leadership development through a variety of practices. First, change your experiences. An individual can change their IAT results by developing positive associations with others who are different. Experiments have shown that exposure to images of well-known and accomplished Black male leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Jr and Colin Powell, demonstrated a reduction in automatic White preference in the Race IAT (Greenwald and Nilanjana 2001, 800). On a similar note, one should look for what they share in common with other groups rather than focusing on differences in order to build rapport. Second, the use of tools and assessments can be put to use in order to gather data on the skills, competencies and abilities of individuals. Such tools include the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), DiSC, INSIGHT Inventory, and many others. (Although free from the bias of a performance review, it is important to factor reporting bias into the results.) Furthermore, gathering feedback via anonymous surveys can ensure you are meeting the leadership development needs of your

workforce, particularly the women and people of color on staff. Third, create a culture within the workplace that values the voices of those who are not always recognized. Support projects initiated by a diversity of staff. Listen to, and give equal weight to, everyone who speaks up in a meeting. Populate the office with positive images of women and people of color in leadership roles. Finally, provide coaching and mentoring to all individuals who express interest in advancing professionally. Often, an organization’s policies and procedures are not enough to increase diversity and inclusion. Change the culture, change the practice.

**Behavior Change**  
(Making it Stick)

Robert Kegan, PhD and Lisa Lahey, PhD from Harvard University published *Immunity to Change* in 2009, providing insights as to why individuals and organizations have difficulty with change, and offering a road map to address and achieve change. To begin, one must identify their improvement goal. Afterwards, one should complete the “map” below. By completing this exercise, an individual brings awareness and mindfulness to the change approach, uncovering the psychological and emotional barriers to change.

Column 1	Column 2	Column 3	Column 4
What is your improvement goal?	What are you doing that works against completing your goal?	What are your competing commitment that work against completing your goal?	What are the assumptions you are making that are keeping you from attaining your goal?
Response:	Response:	Response:	Response:

Adapted from: Kegan, Robert and Lahey, Lisa. 2009. *Immunity to Change*. Boston: Harvard Business Press.

## **Conclusion**

All humans are susceptible to the unconscious biases that plague our existence, resulting in making errors in judgment, faulty decisions and reducing others to stereotypes. Many of these snap decisions are made so quickly and innately, we aren't even aware of them. This leads to assumptions we make about the capabilities and qualities of others who we may regard as different from ourselves. In making such judgments, we may conclude that these individuals would make poor leaders, or are unworthy of leadership development efforts. Many experts have researched and explored the concepts of implicit bias, especially with regard to race and gender. To be sure, implicit bias extends to weight, age and general appearance. We make tiny judgments about a person immediately upon interaction, assessing them unconsciously (or sometimes overtly), often drawing false conclusions. However, with mindfulness and intentionality, individuals and organizations can be more inclusive in their leadership development practices, lifting up a diverse group of growing leaders to their fullest potential.

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