

## **Overcoming Unconscious Biases Reduces Barriers to Belonging**

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Biases affect all people. We cannot ask people to meet one another's unique needs unless we understand our unconscious biases.

Assume you are a hiring manager. You pick up a resume and see someone named Alex Stewart. They have a bachelor's degree in international affairs, have worked in their chosen field for 13 years, and have won awards for their practice in said field. What do they look like to you? Did you picture the Black woman who is the director of operations for Auburn University's women's basketball this season?

The misconception is that biases are negative unconscious brain shortcuts, but biases are ways our brain naturally sorts information. To achieve equity and understanding, we have to ask ourselves, "How can I change my brain's hardwiring?" It's important to regularly share your "I caught my own bias" moments and how you pivoted, so others can learn from your lessons learned.

### **Listen to others' experiences**

Getting perspectives that are unlike your own, especially in the workplace, can create opportunities for a richer and more compelling outcome. No two experiences are identical, so if we listen to the stories of others, we can better empathize with one another, shift from awareness to action, and interrupt the potential negative impact of unchecked bias through sustained change.

Leaders can make swift and direct impacts, including modifying common language, promoting shared trust between the company and its employees, and holding everyone accountable. When you understand your employees and customers better, you have a better sense of the tools they need to be successful, which ultimately trickle into your products and services. Leaders must Listen. Learn. Then Lead with TLC (Transparency, Leadership by Example, and Caring)<sup>™</sup>. [Catalyst's](#) study of over 800 employees found that those who prioritize empathy and listening to the experiences of those around them as a leadership tactic saw substantial increases in production, employee engagement, and retention, and work culture. By incorporating active listening to understand the experience of others, leaders can respond to questions, comments, concerns, or other matters with information tailored specifically to the situation to successfully solve the matter at hand, finding the most preferred result for all.

### **Promote DEIB through allyship**

As individuals practicing to become more effective allies, it's important to be intentional in asking ourselves daily, "Do my words and actions intentionally promote DEI +Belonging?" "How can I become better at spotting or hearing when a colleague doesn't feel supported?"

Direct examples of allyship include calling everyone by their preferred name and asking for your employees' pronouns before they offer them and paying extra close attention to the images and wording included in the company's newsletters, on their websites, and in marketing efforts. When stock images of employees are used that do not reflect the true employee base, including gender, ability, age, bias, etc., attention needs to be called to it to make a change. Action can't happen if no one is willing to call out places for improvement.

### **Incorporating an equity lens into hiring practices**

Bias can take many forms, from gender bias and ageism to name bias. Whether conscious or unconscious, prejudice can reinforce harmful stereotypes and severely hinder personal and professional progression. Taking steps to improve recruitment can mean a greater pool of more diverse candidates.

Although giving each applicant a standardized interview is important, doing the same recruitment routine for each role based on the value of being an “equal opportunity employer” does not translate to equitable hiring. For example, if you are not reaching a wide span of minority applicants, try job fairs in underrepresented communities, look into career advancement centers, or seek alumni of HBCUs, MSIs, or HSIs instead of your usual job board sites. During the interview, use a panel of diverse leadership instead of a one-on-one interview. Some firms are sharing the nature of their interview questions in advance to allow everyone time to thoughtfully prepare. This approach, similar to a pre-read document, can reduce potential bias against candidates who might benefit from the preparation time due to cognitive process thinking differences or primary language differences. Making small changes could be all the difference in making huge strides toward a more diverse and inclusive workforce.

The true value of diversity can be returned to the company through the ROI (Relationships, Outcomes, and Impact) of DEI™. Bringing in unique perspectives not only produces fresh, new ideas but is proven to improve performance. A study by [Gartner](#) revealed that a highly diverse environment can improve team performance by up to 30%. Diversity can also lead to better decision-making and higher profitability. In fact, according to [McKinsey & Company](#), the most diverse companies outperform their less diverse peers by 36% in profitability.

True inclusivity doesn't just check boxes. Conquering biases requires demolishing systems that are so ingrained with them, you don't notice they are there. It's up to each of us, companies, and the allies to continue to speak up, make the necessary changes, and measure progress over time. Once we meet each other with grace and kindness, we'll find equal access to opportunity and resources to thrive.