



FlexBulletin #122 – Googling “Bias” should bring up “Mutual Respect”

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Our perilous times call for more than the changes to date and the surfacing of Bias

It has been said that “You can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs.” When the advocates of Diversity and Inclusion in major employers began their campaigns to remake company cultures open to and supportive of diverse populations, few knew how extraordinarily long and hard the road would be. And how deeply fractured our country and its workplaces would become.

There is no need to catalog the challenges that have occurred on many fronts. Pervasive discrimination in hiring, evaluations, mentoring and promotions are continuing barriers. Strategies to overcome them have ranged from structural change like affirmative action to training on sexual harassment. We are all veterans in some way of initiatives to disrupt racism, misogyny, homophobia and discrimination against older workers. Yet open and hidden bias remains.

Over the years implicit bias training has emerged as a tool for fundamental change and gained considerable traction. Google has emerged as the most visible object of the broad critique of tech’s weak diversity numbers and seemingly discriminatory practices. To its credit, Google committed to developing, implementing and sharing implicit bias training aimed at serious internal climate change. Many employers used their tools, developed their own or contracted with a wave of anti-bias trainers. D&I has added this offering to the long menu of steps progressive employers might take on the journey to inclusion.

Charlottesville has demonstrated that our social challenge is no longer “implicit”

I am not a prophet, but I can sometimes see a train wreck coming. Unfortunately, I have suspected for some time that our focus on bias is both too little too late and too limited for the task we face. As Laszlo Bock, then SVP of People Operations at Google described the company’s effort:

“We need to help people identify and understand their biases so that they can start to combat them. So we developed a workshop in which more than 26,000 Googlers have taken part. And it’s made an impact: Participants were significantly more aware, had greater understanding, and were more motivated to overcome bias.”

Education and awareness are clearly laudable objectives. But in this period of a rapidly polarizing and increasingly disrespectful culture, building awareness of one’s biases is a necessary but not sufficient approach. Even when it includes reexamining and modifying the full range of talent management practices, deeper challenges elude bias training. A further drawback is its branding and positioning as an anti- or negative effort rather than a positive and aspirational goal that can unite disparate groups.

More importantly, the often limited “self-awareness” and “understanding” of stand-alone training may not link directly to the pervasive changes in habits and behavior that are essential to repair the social fabric both at our workplaces and in our real and virtual communities. The relentless and aggressive taking of sides, demonizing opponents and doubling down on our “acceptable” biases are overwhelming dialog and shared values. Implicit bias training is a good, modest first step toward essential healing – but a positive and more robust next step is urgently needed.

The Mutual Respect framework and practices offer a path toward greater inclusion

The only way to approach this dangerous moment is with considerable humility. We have been descending into the current chasm of profound distrust and disrespect for decades. There is no silver bullet or short and easy solution. As citizens in workplaces we *can and must* set a positive and inclusive goal and begin the systematic process of changing individual and organizational behavior from any tolerance of bias, distrust and disrespect to an achievable and accountable environment of **mutual respect**. And as difficult and challenging an idea as it may be, mutual respect must start with each of us exercising the respect we easily find so lacking in others.

Education and awareness are good. But collective commitment to positive standards and the habits and skills that actualize them is better. For more than a decade our principals have pioneered an approach to inclusive change that is anchored in seven organization-wide standards and corresponding behaviors/habits. These deceptively “simple” productive practices implemented universally and reinforced regularly can transform workplaces into more inclusive, tolerant and innovative environments:

- We suspend assumptions
- We always pay attention
- We listen attentively & speak directly
- We delegate and develop fully
- We provide feedback consistently
- We resolve conflicts respectfully
- We do what we promise

First the bias is surfaced, and then the real challenges begin

How does this approach advance the struggle against bias and discrimination? Mutual respect is a recognizable, unsparing norm. It insists on respectful, inclusive behavior all around. Neither top nor bottom – nor those in between – get a pass or exemption from these standards and practices. And that’s the central value of this approach. Each standard is linked to an implementing set of behaviors, typically addressing engrained habits that can be systematically challenged and changed through the adoption of Mutual Respect charters and the training and coaching required to normalize the desired behaviors.

Mutual Respect challenges the cluster of biased attitudes and behaviors under the broader rubric of “assumptions.” The achievable objective of suspending assumptions does not seek initially to undo or drive underground disrespectful attitudes; people are trained to set them aside in systematic fashion. Implicit bias training can be a powerful step in surfacing a range of key barriers to inclusion.

But our evolving organizations remain in the grip of dozens of complementary and dangerous working assumptions besides these that are borne of the 20th century’s industrial models. That era’s white male worker icon is more fully described as a full time, always available, unengaged, dependent-free worker whose value will be demeaned with age – and whose loyalty will be rewarded by early terminations and rigid retirement practices.

All organizations have a behavioral charter which frequently needs radical revision

Left unchallenged, a broad range of deeply held assumptions anchor habitual disrespectful behaviors and animate destructive practices from sexual harassment and exclusive hiring to rigid scheduling and backward Parental leaves and PTO policies. The fundamental difference between the Mutual Respect and even enhanced awareness approaches lies in the insistence on an organizational commitment to creating a fully shared framework. This is accomplished with these general steps:

- Conducting diagnostic interviews and groups to assess skills sets and levers for change
- Crafting with leaders and testing a working charter defining collaborative, respectful principles
- Socializing the standards and modifying habits by intensively training managers and employees
- Monitoring, reinforcing and refreshing an agreed-upon habit change and accountability regimen

Respectful behavior can be demanded, designed and developed. It takes a widely shared goal, will and enduring commitment to bring it to life. For those skeptical that mutually respectful behavior can be introduced or returned to the workplace, there is inspiration in a now taken for granted effort: the smoke-free environment. There was a time not so long ago when conference rooms, cafeterias and offices were plagued with disrespectful and unhealthy second-hand smoke. Millions suffered in silence while others puffed away in disregard and indifference, assuming that these addictive habits were acceptable.

Most organizations have some positive experience creating toxin-free environments

Over many years, employer by employer, one lunch room or all conference rooms at a time, a pervasive national campaign led to smoke-free offices, and eventually clean air in restaurants, airports and hotels. Smokers were not terminated or forced to quit their habits. But employers offered smoking cessation options and broader wellness initiatives. Most importantly, tens of millions of employees no longer assumed smoking in closed spaces was normal and acceptable. A bedrock assumption ended.

Of course racial, gender and age biases are not smoking. But they thrive in unbounded and toxic atmospheres, and can be reined in by comprehensive and forceful campaigns. Awareness and education are a part of these processes, vital but insufficient measures for the challenges we face. Mutual respect will prevail when we demand and organize it.

Such was the case in our work with a major collaborative project involving 16 New York hospitals and their Nurses union. We applied the Mutual Respect model to address conflicts among and between extremely diverse staffs, managers and employee populations over issues of deeply held biases and assumptions that disrupted employee relations, patient care and RN scheduling. In addition to noticeable improvement in standard metrics, key labor and management participants summarized the outcomes in a joint evaluation:

“Here people are now more likely to work together. The Mutual Respect process has opened up the dialogue between management & staff, greatly increasing our ability to work together across our many differences. Patient flow, staff satisfaction and patient and family feedback are greatly improved.”

Mutual Respect is an achievable goal and one appropriate to the divisions that threaten all of us.

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