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Refresh your diversity training

January is a great time to assess how well your school district is doing at meeting its goals. If one of those goals is inclusivity, diversity training can be a great way to bring staff on board.

Diversity training is any program designed to facilitate positive intergroup interaction, reduce prejudice and discrimination, and generally teach individuals who are different from others how to work together effectively. For schools, the added benefit is that those newly acquired skills can be turned around and taught to students, leading to a more effective learning environment for everyone.

It's easy to have a knee-jerk reaction towards diversity training. Industries have historically used diversity training as a response to perceived inaction or bad behavior in the past, but there's another way to look at it. Diversity training used proactively not only improves relationships between colleagues and students, but it can also prevent the types of situations that lead to lawsuits and negative media attention in the first place.

But I'm not racist!

Diversity training isn't just for straight, white men. It's for everyone. "Unconscious bias (or implicit bias) is a prejudice in favor of or against one thing, person, or group compared with another usually in a way that's considered to be unfair. Biases may be held by an individual, group or institution." <http://bit.ly/2rqZN0C> Most of our unconscious biases were learned when we were young, making them more difficult to root out and analyze, and minority populations aren't free of these biases themselves.

Unconscious bias is the thing we all have to watch out for, but because we are all a product of our backgrounds, staying vigilant isn't enough. The best way to remove the harm that comes from unconscious bias is to set systems in place that prevent those biases from affecting our decisions.

One of the ways hiring managers avoid bias is by reading resumes only once the names have been covered or removed. This makes it impossible for them to unconsciously value the experience of a man over a woman, or a white person over a person of color, should those happen to be their biases. But hiring managers also only have access to the resumes they receive — if you are receiving resumes from an agency, you also need a system that works around their implicit biases as well. A way around that is to insist that fifty percent of the resumes they send be women or people of color, if those are the populations historically being under-represented in those positions.

In the classroom, unconscious bias has shown itself in the rate at which black students get punished for similar infractions to white students. (<http://bit.ly/33ZZgjp>) One of the reasons for this is the unconscious bias leading teachers and administrators to perceive black boys as

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(Over)

“older” than white boys of the same age. (<http://bit.ly/38fhmBv>) “The evidence shows that perceptions of the essential nature of children can be affected by race, and for black children, this can mean they lose the protection afforded by assumed childhood innocence well before they become adults,” said co-author Matthew Jackson, PhD. “With the average age overestimation for black boys exceeding four-and-a-half years, in some cases, black children may be viewed as adults when they are just 13 years old.”

One way around this problem is to have very clear and detailed standards of behavior and what the responses are for each infraction, keeping the decision making out of the hands of an individual who might be subject to unconscious bias.

What are ways your organization might be subject to unconscious bias, and what systems can you put in place to avoid it?

Diversity — not just a buzzword

Diversity is more than just black and white. A truly diverse staff is a more *effective* staff, because the array of experiences means you have people on top of problems before they have a chance to develop. The *less* diverse your staff, the more subject you are to blind spots.

When you have a meeting and a microphone is set up, does everyone use it? Jessie B. Ramey, director of the Women’s Institute at Chatham University and chair of the Gender Equity Commission for the City of Pittsburgh, points out that this is an area where organizations often exclude populations without ever being aware of it. “Refusing to use a microphone is like scheduling a meeting in a room accessible only by stairs,” Ramey explains. “And then when your colleague in a wheelchair shows up and asks for a ramp so she can attend, you stand at the top of the steps and say, ‘No thanks, I’m good.’ Those of us with low hearing, a hearing impairment, or a hearing-assistive device need you to speak into the microphone so we can fully understand your words.” <http://bit.ly/2P2sXw8>

This microphone situation is the kind of unintentional misstep that having a hearing-diverse staff member would be able to predict and prevent. Multiply this by the variety of humans with different disabilities and different cultural experiences and you can see the weaknesses an organization subjects itself to when it isn’t diverse!

Inclusion

Let’s say your administration has done the heavy lifting. You’ve made diverse hires, you’ve assessed your systems and made changes. The next step is making sure people feel included. True inclusivity goes beyond just following the new guidelines preventing bias — it means thinking ahead.

You may have seen instances of people declaring their personal pronouns in their email signatures, but if you haven’t, you soon will. In some industries they are already common practice. Personal pronouns are *he/him/his* and *she/her/hers*, and with widening inclusivity towards non-binary and genderqueer individuals, also *they/their/theirs*. Trans individuals whose appearance doesn’t fully match their gender, and people with gender-neutral or ambiguous names have been using them for years to avoid being misgendered, but ideally it is their colleagues who should be creating a culture where declaring your pronouns is the standard. <http://bit.ly/2LzwpMx>

“I love seeing folks use their pronouns in their email signature,” says E Napoletano, a non-binary journalist. “It’s effortless, ridiculously inclusive, and helps avoid many instances of

needless misgendering. In my signature, I have a link below my pronouns that says ‘What are these? Click here to learn more.’ which goes to a site that explains gender-inclusive pronouns. This lets people new to pronoun declarations learn in private. Because the truth is we’re all still learning, no matter how we identify.”

Diversity training can cover all of these issues. As you take a look at your organization and its preparedness for the work it does in your community, consider diversity training as a tool to make your team more effective.

Contributed by Megan J. Wilson, Los Angeles-based freelance writer and communications consultant.