The New Positive Psychology Approach to Unconscious Bias, Implicit Bias and Inclusive Workplaces
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The days when a company can safely do the bare minimum to comply with diversity and inclusion initiatives are at an end. Simply having well-intentioned diversity policies is not enough. When organizations realize diversity and inclusion training is a powerful business tool, the gap between good intentions and real-world change will be bridged.

As one of the world’s largest business training providers, SkillPath understands the challenges learning and development professionals have when training on diversity and inclusion. The simple fact is that all learners have implicit biases, which makes this training difficult.

The biggest danger is when learners are given the wrong message about bias. When learners hear that “implicit bias is everywhere” and “everyone has an unconscious bias,” experts say this message normalizes prejudice. Instead, implicit or unconscious bias training is most effective when it acknowledges the existence of bias and teaches individuals how to overcome mindless habits that edge our thoughts to inappropriate cultural stereotypes.

Additionally, companies that only frame diversity and inclusion against the backdrop of race or gender are in danger of fueling resentment among employees. These programs are often viewed by majority employees as favoring or benefiting only some groups, while members of the minority see the training as disingenuous because it doesn’t reflect a real commitment to action toward a more diverse workplace.

Laws and protections are evolving to not only oblige employers to provide workplaces that are free from discrimination, but also to broaden how we think of diversity and inclusion. A growing volume of cases also lead us to rethink the differences between intentional discrimination and discrimination caused by implicit bias.

Statistics tell us that diversity programs did not significantly increase workplace diversity over the last 20 years. Even where diversity metrics are met by HR practitioners, inclusion is often missing. Unfortunately, many programs are cobbled together in response to a series of high-profile discrimination lawsuits in the U.S. financial industry. One financial giant paid nearly half a billion dollars over a 15-year period largely due to its disregard to diversity and inclusion.
While organizations remain challenged on how best to make inclusion the responsibility of every employee and curb the implicit bias that can prevent it, some initiatives are showing more promise than others.

Research from the past 40-year wave of diversity and bias training reveals some best practices in building awareness, changing attitudes and developing skills for interacting—as well as minimizing the risk of backlash. While it’s clear that training builds lasting knowledge of other groups, behaviors and attitudes are harder to change. By extending diversity and inclusion training over longer periods of time, integrating it with other initiatives and avoiding training programs that stir employee resentment or normalize prejudice, companies can improve their results and motivate learners to be more inclusive.

69% of executives rated diversity and inclusion an important issue in 2017, compared to 59% in 2014.²

Source: Global Human Capital Trends, 2017
Moving Beyond Compliance: A Closer Look at Inclusion and Its Benefits

Of the 328 million U.S. citizens, approximately half make up the U.S. workforce. It’s an increasingly diverse group including many legally protected classes: Race, gender, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, physical disability, pregnancy and veteran status.

The Constitution gives each person equal protection under the law. And over time, a growing body of federal and state laws have fallen into place to help constrain discrimination.

At the same time, diversity is evolving beyond the specific group labels outlined in legislation. People want to be recognized for their distinct personalities, core values, backgrounds and the way they process information and approach problems. Organizations, too, are recognizing the value in embracing these individual differences.

“Ten years ago, when organizations like Denny’s and Coca-Cola were getting ‘caught’ doing wrong, diversity and affirmative action were treated as remedial solutions,” says Lisa Willis Johnson, deputy director of HR for the city of Columbus, Ohio, and past chair of SHRM’s Workplace Diversity Committee. “We’re now looking at a whole different picture.” Diversity is no longer only a social mandate; it is also a competitive advantage, she says.

The benefits of workplace diversity continue to be confirmed by research:

- **Profitability**—Public companies in the top quartile for racial and ethnic diversity were 35 percent more likely to have financial returns above their industry medians.

- **Recruiting**—67 percent of workers said that a diverse workforce is an important factor when evaluating companies and job offers.

- **Innovation**—Employees at companies where leaders exhibit diversity and encourage “outside the box” thinking are 45 percent more likely to report that their firm’s market share grew over the previous year and 70 percent more likely to report that the firm captured a new market.

- **Employee satisfaction**—Every single company on Fortune magazine’s “100 Best Companies to Work For” includes sexual orientation in its nondiscrimination policy. More than half of these companies include gender identity.

- **Decision making**—Diverse groups are better at decision making than homogenous groups, which is due largely to dramatic changes in white behavior in diverse groups.
Diverse but not inclusive

Workplace diversity is clearly in the spotlight. While meeting affirmative action numbers and complying with laws designed to stop discrimination is necessary, it’s not the same as inclusion.

If your company has 12 people of color, 15 Caucasians and 2 workers of Asian descent; half this group is women; their ages range from 22 – 72; and there are several different religions, your organization is diverse. But it’s not necessarily inclusive.

Simply putting disparate people together is not enough. Diverse groups often struggle to communicate, resolve conflict and work well as a team. This is not intentional, but neuroscience research shows it’s due to “hardwiring in our brains that programs us to be drawn to and to trust people with whom we share characteristics.” We’re often unaware of these instinctive preferences.

Creating an atmosphere of inclusion that values, respects and intentionally engages differences is essential. Like what Janet Reid and Vincent Brown wrote in *Psychology Today*, “An inclusive culture is one in which people feel comfortable, connected and supported with individuals who are similar, and with those who are different. They are free to express their opinions and disagree because there’s a high level of trust among all group members.”

By building diverse teams in inclusive settings, they can substantially improve problem solving and increase employee innovation and engagement.

**Most business leaders understand the diversity part of diversity and inclusion. They get that having a diverse workforce is important to customers and critical to succeeding in a global market. It’s the inclusion part that eludes them—creating an environment where people can be who they are, that values their unique talents and perspectives, and makes them want to stay.**

The influence of bias

While the majority of people aim to treat others with fairness and equality, psychological research shows that our behavior is often influenced by subtle biases that operate outside our conscious awareness. Through repeated cultural exposure, human minds are conditioned to associate specific traits, characteristics and behaviors with certain groups of people. When we encounter a person from one of these groups, those associations arise spontaneously, and they can influence our judgment and behavior toward that person, without our awareness or intent.

These unconscious biases are different from known biases that individuals may choose to conceal for reasons of social or political correctness. They also may not necessarily align with our declared beliefs or even reflect values we explicitly endorse.

**67%** of potential job candidates said that a diverse workforce is an important factor when evaluating companies and job offers.
Because implicit bias is so pervasive—yet remains outside conscious awareness—it can be particularly deceptive, influence our thinking and lead to discrimination. Sociologist Nancy DiTomaso said that discrimination today is less about treating people from other groups badly, but more about giving preferential treatment to people who are part of our “in-groups.”

The good news is researchers suggest that unconscious bias is a habit of the mind. Professionals at Ohio State University’s Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity report that implicit biases are malleable and can be unlearned. However, if this behavior is not changed, it can easily lead to discrimination and the exclusion of entire categories of people.

Training Presents an Unconscious Bias Intervention

U.S. companies spend an estimated $8 billion a year on diversity training. Beginning in the 1960s, programs focused largely on overt discrimination and HR issues, acting largely as a litigation shield. In the 1980s and 1990s, training made a shift, as organizations (particularly those lacking in diversity) tried to make employees aware of their own “blind spots” and attempted to wipe out implicit bias. Some approaches from early diversity training models have been found to be ineffective or even counterproductive.

Princeton psychologist Betsy Levy Paluck warns that when the message of unconscious bias training is that “implicit bias is everywhere,” it normalizes prejudice. A better message would be: “Yes, we all have minds that, if we’re not careful, can reflect cultural stereotypes, and that we need to fight against habits of mind.”

Additionally, organizations that frame diversity and inclusion in terms of racial or gender discrimination are in danger of fueling employee resentment—if not lawsuits. These types of programs are often viewed by employees as a benefit to only some groups and can fuel reverse discrimination charges. By the same token, they can appear inauthentic to minority groups rather than reflecting a real commitment to diversity and inclusion.

Negative reactions to training can surface as low morale, high turnover and poor productivity.
Guiding the future direction of training

Fortunately, we have years of training data to help lead the next wave of training. In 2016, Cornell University published research by four university professors who compiled findings from countless studies to help guide future training direction.\(^\text{18}\)

When looking at their findings, it reinforces the idea that general and HR practitioner training is best.

1. **Cognitive learning is most effective.**
   Diversity training can temporarily increase knowledge, attitudes and skills, but only cognitive learning has been shown to stand the test of time.

2. **Pair diversity with awareness—and behavior-based training.** Rather than focusing on race and gender, consider training that teaches people what to say, how to speak up, what to do when they’re offended and how to treat everyone nicely. Also, help employees to work well with employees of different perspectives, backgrounds and ideas.\(^\text{19}\)

3. **Integrated diversity training adds to effectiveness.** Training may be paired alongside an organization-supported networking group of minority professionals, a formal mentoring program with an eye toward underserved subgroups or recruiting in diverse cities or colleges.

4. **Learners are motivated by executive commitment to diversity.** When supervisors support the training, and when the organization has other diversity practices in place, it signals their commitment to diversity and inclusion. Additionally, when leaders within an organization are diverse, it can also signal commitment to diversity and inclusion.\(^\text{20}\)

Breaking habits through training

The University of Wisconsin’s Prejudice and Intergroup Relations Lab looks at bias as a habit that can be broken, and its researchers weigh in positively on unconscious bias training. They suggest including three essential elements for antibias intervention: Awareness of the problem, motivation to do something about it and strategies for what to do. Strategies include observing when stereotypes arise and mentally replacing them, actively looking for situational explanations for a person’s behavior and trying to imagine what the world would look and feel like from another person’s point of view.

Initial results of this approach are promising among college students, showing those who received training were more likely to notice incidents of bias. Effects of the training were still evident two years later.\(^\text{16}\) Some of the strategies offered by this approach—resisting the easy labeling of others and envisioning why a person might be acting the way they do—have proven effective in other trainings, including a group of middle-school teachers.

No one denies the complexity of unconscious bias training. But years of training efforts offer guidance. And the growing diversity of the U.S. makes it vital that organizations take steps to make workers more aware of naturally occurring unconscious bias and give them the tools to help them work together—helping ensure the fair treatment and inclusion of all individuals.
SkillPath’s Approach to Unconscious Bias Training

SkillPath introduced a new training program that tackles unconscious and implicit bias by helping learners understand the psychology behind bias. The program provides an introspective look at bias through cognitive science and focuses on strategies for preventing biases as well as correcting them.

SkillPath provides a comprehensive list of products related to unconscious and implicit bias because we understand the need for a comprehensive solution.

Four core modules

1. **Reconsidering certainty and doubt**
   The module looks at the difference between practical knowledge and certainty; helps learners understand the value of using doubt when approaching situations; explores what it means to doubt; and examines the role common sense plays in thinking. This module opens learners up to the value of questioning their certainty, which is essential to confronting unconscious bias.

2. **Confirmation bias**
   The module teaches how confirmation bias shapes and reinforces world views; how confirmation and cognitive dissonance keeps learners in comfortable modes of thinking, even when those thoughts could be harmful; and how beliefs and ideas can cause people to act in a way that causes behaviors and reactions that confirm these beliefs.

3. **Schemas and heuristics**
   The module reviews how heuristics and schemas are used to process information. It teaches how to tell the difference between situations where you can rely on more automatic forms of thinking, and those that are complex and require more information to make a decision.

4. **The power we have**
   The module teaches about the executive functions of the brain and how they can be used to undo flawed or biased thinking and actions. Learners are also introduced to executive functions and how they are used to imagine alternative actions and behavior that can overcome reactive thinking and actions, how they relate to freedom of thought and action, and how they can be used to overcome difficult problems and situations.
Electives

In addition to the four core modules, learners will be presented with two additional modules to produce a full day of learning and development on unconscious bias.

Two modules focused on diversity and inclusion

The fundamentals of inclusion

In the module, learners discuss what inclusion is and how empathy and concepts like the Golden Rule make a convincing case for practicing inclusive thought and behavior. Learners will investigate the costs and benefits associated with inclusive and exclusive thinking, as well as determine the value of inclusion.

Stereotypes and implicit bias

In the module, learners will discover explicit and implicit stereotypes that can be problematic in the workplace and how to manage situations involving implicit bias. Learners will explore strategies for communicating when they feel they’ve been a target of implicit bias as well as strategies for dealing with any implicit biases they have.

Two modules on legal considerations related to implicit bias

Harassment

The module describes legislation that is relevant to implicit bias as it relates to harassment. It provides guidance from the EEOC on the criteria for harassment and how that criteria can be used to better understand implicit bias. The module describes how learners can deal with implicit biases to prevent harassment from occurring or persisting.

Discrimination in typical employment contexts

In the module, learners are presented with the laws related to disparate impact. The module provides insight as to how implicit bias might inadvertently lead to disparate impact discrimination in typical employment context such as hiring and performance evaluation. Learners are given exercises to apply these concepts and reduce the likelihood of discrimination in hiring and performance evaluation.
HR practitioner workshop

SkillPath has also produced a half-day workshop aimed at HR practitioners who are looking to make a difference and do something about the effects of implicit bias in their workplaces.

- In the first module, learners will examine what implicit bias is, including relevant legal considerations.
- The second module is about the fundamentals of inclusion, including its catalytic role in making diversity work. The module discusses the benefits of diversity and inclusion and learners will create a draft vision for diversity and inclusion in their organization.
- The third module is a facilitated workshop where learners will first learn techniques for effecting change in their organizations and then spend the remaining time identifying how to integrate implicit bias into operational and strategic HR functions including talent and career development functions and programs.

Today's employers are obliged to ensure their workplaces are free from discrimination. Simply having a well-intentioned diversity policy is not enough. Laws and workplace protections have broadened how we view diversity and inclusion. A growing volume of cases also has caused us to think about the differences between intentional discrimination and discrimination caused by unconscious bias.

While organizations remain challenged on how best to make inclusion the responsibility of every employee and curb the implicit bias that can prevent it, training can be a powerful business tool that can shift good intentions to policies and programs that bring about real change.
About the Author

Dave Fogleman, SPHR, is the Chief Learning Officer for SkillPath, leading and providing the vision for the instructional design department. Dave is a chief learning officer known for leading award-winning, best-in-class learning and development programs and functions that nurture top talent and maximize organizational effectiveness and performance. He is a collaborative, engaging leader who creates positive working environments where high performers continually innovate and thrive.

Prior to joining SkillPath, Dave had a 25-year career at Sprint, where he created dramatic improvements in performance, improved sales and employee satisfaction, and reduced employee attrition. He also led the award-winning Sprint corporate university that has received national recognition from the Association of Talent Development, the International Society for Performance Improvement, Training magazine, the Masie Learning Institute and the Conference Executive Board.

About SkillPath

A leader in learning and development since 1989, SkillPath provides professionals worldwide with strategic and innovative training solutions.

Our mission is to provide the highest-quality training for companies and businesspeople around the world, so they can benefit personally and professionally from the experience.

As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, our revenue funds scholarships for students at Graceland University. We have a long history of partnering with programs that develop individuals’ leadership and innovation skills, and our mission aligns with companies that share a goal to invest in mentoring and scholarship opportunities for students and young professionals.

To learn more about this topic or other workplace challenges, download additional free resources at skillpath.com/resources.
References


