Neuroscience of Talent

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By Karen Cvitkovich

How effectively and accurately do you assess talent when you conduct job interviews and when you judge their abilities and make decisions about their careers? I find that two behaviors impede the ability to effectively recruit and hire global talent—*interview bias* and *inaccurate talent assessments*.

Interview bias is the erroneous perception of a candidate by the interviewer that results in overestimating or underestimating the candidate's ability and qualifications. Such bias can also impact assessments of current employees and their potential. *Inaccurate talent assessments* can result in bad hiring decisions that can add huge costs and an unfair situation for the candidate.

Recruiting, developing, and retaining the best talent is vital for growth. Unconscious bias impacts assessing talent accurately. To ensure we are assessing talent accurately, we can look to the field of *cultural neuroscience*. This field uses cultural psychology, brain imaging technology, and genetics to measure how cultural values and practices shape thinking and behavior.

Bias in Action

Over 15 years, I've facilitated hundreds of groups exploring cultural differences and their impact on perceptions. A key framework for these sessions is *cultural dimensions*—continuums of difference across cultures. They give individuals a common language to explore some of the similarities and differences they may experience.

In a popular exercise, we define one of many cultural dimensions as risk and restraint. Some individuals and cultures tend to be *risk-oriented*—they prefer rapid decision-making and quick results, value flexibility and initiative, and value speed over thoroughness. In contrast *restraint-oriented individuals* spend time on background research, establish proper procedures before starting a project, and value thoroughness over speed. In this exercise,individuals are asked to place themselves on a line, one end representing *risk* and the other *restraint*, either based on where they fall on a cultural assessment tool (such as *GlobeSmart*®) or based on their self-perceptions. Individuals on each end of the spectrum are given a scenario to consider in which they have been put in charge of a very important project. They have been assigned members of the project team to manage—as opposed to being able to choose the members themselves—and as they work with these team members, they realize that they are the opposite style to themselves. Each group—the *risk-oriented* and *restraint-oriented*—is asked to prepare a list of adjectives describing these team members.

As a second step, each group is asked to write adjectives that describe themselves. People tend to describe individuals who are different from themselves with negative adjectives and themselves with positive words. This is often called *the mirror exercise* since the words we use to describe others who we view as different is often the mirror image of how we describe ourselves. Why? And what implications does this have on assessing global talent accurately?

Potential Causes of Interview Bias

This bias is not because we are bad people or intentionally make negative judgments about people who are different than ourselves. This is a result of how our brains are wired. In her research, Kathy Bobula describes the concept of *implicit* or *unconscious* bias (*This is Your Brain on Bias…or, The Neuroscience of Bias*). It is processed at an unconscious level without our awareness that the bias even exists, let alone influences our behavior. Implicit bias is activated automatically and includes emotions or feelings about the target. The implicit stereotypes that people have "are category associations that become activated" without the person's intention or awareness when he or she interacts with a person different than themselves. For example, an employer who, having several equally qualified job applicants, chooses the one who is a member of his/her *in group*, citing that the applicant would *fit in* better with co-workers. In conditions of stress, multi-tasking, or need for closure, this bias becomes more pronounced and can lead to an unearned advantage or disadvantage.

In his writings about the *SCARF Model*, David Rock cites research on how our brain functions, leveraging the work of fellow neuroscientist, Evian Gordan. (*SCARF: A Brain-Based Model for Collaborating with and Influencing Others.*) When we meet a new person in an interview or casually, the brain is programmed to minimize danger and maximize reward. According to Gordon's *Integrate Model*, five times each second the brain non-consciously determines what is dangerous and positive and the strongest responses are to avoid what is perceived as *different* or *dangerous,* especially in five social situations: **s**tatus, **c**ertainty, **a**utonomy, **r**elatedness and **f**airness (SCARF). (*An 'Integrative Neuroscience' Platform: Application to Profiles of Negativity and Positivity Bias*). When we sense a drop in any of these areas, our brains perceive danger, and unconsciously, we try to avoid it.

The decision that someone is a friend or a foe happens quickly and impacts brain functioning. Information from people perceived as *like us* is processed using similar brain circuits for thinking one's own thoughts. When someone is perceived as a foe, different circuits are used. Meeting someone unknown tends to generate an automatic threat response. Therefore, this quick evaluation of "friend or foe" when assessing talent impacts a person's filter of that individual and even on the part of the brain used to process data or responses from a candidate.

As organizations globalize, managers and leaders must evaluate the skills and talent of individuals from different countries. "Collaboration between people from different cultures, who are unlikely to meet in person, can be hard work," asserts Rock. This is confirmed by Bopula: "Under stress and pressure, we tend to default to implicit associations. Cross-cultural interactions use more energy. When we are stressed, we have less energy available. Implicit prejudice and stereotypes are most likely to be expressed under these circumstances."

Our tendency to make negative assessments of different people causes us to make inaccurate talent assessments, and prevents us from seeing and leveraging the business value of diverse teams (diverse teams in which the leader acknowledges and supports individual differences and sees those differences as an asset versus an obstacle to overcome tend to perform better than homogeneous teams whose members resemble the leader).

What Can We Do About This?

The more we know ourselves, how our brain works, and the impact of our bias, the more we can self-regulate, question our assumptions, and make more accurate assessments of talent. Aperian Global's study of *What's Different about Global Leadership* provides strategies for minimizing interview bias and making accurate talent

assessments. In this research, 10 key behaviors differentiate successful global leaders, and of these, two help minimize interview bias:

• **Cultural self-awareness**: Seeing our own leadership practices are shaped by a particular cultural environment and realizing that there are other viable ways of getting things done. The more that people assessing talent have a sense of their own culture and style, the more easily they can use this self-awareness to minimize potential biases.

• **Frame-shifting:** Shifting communication style, leadership methods, and strategy to fit different contexts—moving skillfully back and forth between different business environments and seeing the benefits of different approaches, even when they are unfamiliar. The more people assessing talent have a true appreciation of the value of different styles, the better they can acknowledge the value different approaches they may have, in spite of their brain telling them that a different person poses a threat.

Tool for Accurate Talent Assessment

The more you can make an unconscious process conscious, the easier it is to minimize bias. To minimize *interview bias* and to assess and evaluate talent more accurately, I suggest **four actions**: 1) List the main elements of a job or position, based on the job description; 2) identify the competencies of an ideal candidate—what is needed to be successful and what do you value in a candidate?; 3) Identify potential biases that you need to be aware of as you assess the candidate—based on your *cultural self-awareness* what are qualities or attributes that you favor that are not relevant to the success of the candidate for this position? And 4) Identify what questions you can ask that enable you to accurately assess if the person has the needed competencies and will minimize your potential biases—ensure that all questions pass the legal criteria and accurately assess the competency.

Recruiting, developing, and retaining the best global talent is critical to growth. When assessing talent, be aware of our unconscious bias rooted in the functioning of the brain, and how it can be an obstacle to assessing talent accurately and fairly. By developing our *cultural self-awareness* and ability to *frame-shift* and utilizing a more conscious process in assessing global talent, we can minimize interview bias and make more accurate assessments of talent. **LE**

Karen Cvitkovich is Managing Director, Aperian Global, a consulting, training and talent development firm.
Visit **www.Aperian.com**
Email **bcassidy@aperianglobal.com**

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Smart Networking

I have only three simple rules.

By Sallie Krawcheck **blog**   **Interactive**

I don't have to convince you of the power of a creating and maintaining a professional network, do I? Or that networking should be done not only inside your current company but also outside of its walls? Or that networking is often listed as one of the most important unwritten rules of success in business? And that research shows that your next business opportunity (and often, your next job) is more likely to come from a loose connection in your network than from a friend or close colleague?

But networks are like any good investment. The great ones can have an extremely high return on investment (ROI)—but not right away, and often not from the sources that you might expect.

Practice Three Simple Rules

I have only **three simple rules** of networking:

1. Try to meet at least one new person in my area of interest every month, or significantly deepen one existing relationship. I find that meeting at least one new person in my area of interest every month, or significantly deepening an existing relationship every month keeps me connected and relevant.

2. Do something nice for someone in my network every week. Yes, I do something nice for someone in my network every week. This doesn't have to be a big favor like finding someone a job, but instead can be connecting two people who should know each other, sharing research or information that someone you know may find useful, or posting a LinkedIn recommendation on a colleague. True, these favors likely won't find you a new job or get you a big deal next week. (I almost don't know how to reply to the email sitting in my in-box from someone who says that she keeps trying to sell things to new people in her network, but some of them won't buy….or reply.) But over time, these two very simple rules are small seeds that you plant, any one of which can one day provide a strong return. And in the meantime, they'll give you a lot of joy.

Video

3. Make sure that I am spending time with professionals who are different from me. At an extreme, if my network is made up solely of female financial services professionals of my generation, who all hail from the south, I will likely feel very comfortable with them. And I will likely enjoy my time with them. And I will no doubt learn from them. But at some point, this will become an echo chamber of similar-enough experiences and perspectives. Some of my most meaningful new connections over the past few years have been with professionals from different industries and different parts of the country from me. And my most valuable connections may have been with entrepreneurs who are a couple of decades younger than me, who possess a significantly different perspective.

We are all most comfortable networking with (living with and working with) people who are like us. But just as the most successful management and leadership teams bring complementary strengths to the table, so the most meaningful professional networks do as well—even if it takes a bit more effort. **LE**

Sallie Krawcheck is past Head of Merrill Lynch and Smith Barney….Investor….Board Member…Crazed UNC Basketball Fan….Mom.

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