

Hiring

How to Reduce Personal Bias When Hiring

by Ruchika Tulshyan

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Summary. When it comes to hiring diverse candidates, good intentions do not necessarily lead to good results. Often well-intentioned hiring managers end up inadvertently weeding out qualified candidates from underestimated backgrounds because of unconscious bias.... [more](#)

When it comes to hiring candidates from underestimated backgrounds, good intentions do not necessarily lead to good results. I once met a talent acquisition leader at a large global technology

company who had changed the organization's hiring process in multiple ways to bring in more candidates of color but was frustrated by the lack of progress. Internal analyses showed that even though the company had interviewed a higher number of non-white candidates in preliminary rounds, their final hires were still overwhelmingly white.

I've seen this same situation play out in multiple organizations and industries and often it's because well-intentioned hiring managers end up inadvertently weeding out qualified candidates from underestimated backgrounds because of bias.

Changes in process and diversity initiatives alone are not going to remedy the lack of equal representation in companies. Individual managers who are often making the final hiring decisions need to address their own bias.

But how? In my experience, there are several things managers can do.

Before taking any steps, however, it's important to accept that no one is pre-loaded with inclusive behavior; we are, in fact, biologically hardwired to align with people like us and reject those whom we consider different.

Undoing these behaviors requires moving from a fixed mindset — the belief that we're already doing the best we possibly can to build diverse teams — to one of openness and growth, where we can deeply understand, challenge, and confront our personal biases.

Here are the specific strategies I recommend.

Accept that you have biases, especially *affinity bias*

Even if you head up your organization's diversity committee, even if you are from an underrepresented community, you have biases that impact your professional decisions, especially hiring. Affinity bias — having a more favorable opinion of someone like us — is one of the most common. In hiring this often means referring or selecting a

candidate who shares our same race or gender, or who went to the same school, speaks the same language, or reminds us of our younger selves.

Microsoft's head of global talent acquisition, Chuck Edward, told me that affinity bias is widespread in hiring and often leads people to seek out, and hire, candidates who "look, act, and operate" like them. He admits falling into this trap himself. "I've had to be very careful to address it head on," he says.

Create a personal learning list

Spend time reading and learning about the experience of underrepresented communities at work. Among the books I recommend are *So You Want to Talk About Race* by Ijeoma Oluo, *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo, and *What Works* by Iris Bohnet, which was recommended to me by Michelle Gadsen-Williams, a managing director and the North America lead for inclusion and diversity at Accenture. I've found Harvard Business Review's "*Women at Work*" podcast to be an excellent resource as well.

Seek out resources that you wouldn't normally come across and look for books and articles from underrepresented communities. In the U.S., that might include books that include the perspectives of immigrants, people with disabilities, and native American and indigenous communities.

Not only will it help you uncover the biases you're bringing to hiring decisions, it will also equip you with the framework and language to recognize, and possibly call out, bias in your company's processes.

Ask: "Where is, or could, bias show up in this decision?"

One team I work with had hiring managers who would often flippantly say phrases like: "We should hire *this* person. I could easily see myself having beers with them after work." Or "This candidate is qualified, but really isn't a cultural fit."

These comments, laden with bias, would go unchecked. When the leadership team, which was entirely male and white, asked for my help in creating guidelines to reduce bias in the hiring processes, I suggested they start candidate debrief meetings by asking, “Where could bias show up in our decisions today?” This intervention, along with other process changes, led the team to hire two women leaders.

By explicitly acknowledging that we all have biases, especially unconsciously, and creating a space to call them out, there’s an opportunity to hold ourselves and each other accountable.

Reduce the influence of your peers’ opinions on your hiring decisions

In the past, Microsoft would allow hiring managers to see each other’s feedback on a candidate, before it was their turn to interview them. “Everybody on the interview loop could see what others were saying — the words that were used, what was said about a candidate — before interviewing them,” says Edward. “It’s real clear how that could lead to biases and being influenced by someone else’s views.”

Recently, Microsoft made the feedback loop private — a hiring manager can’t log in to the tool and see their colleagues’ feedback until they’ve entered their own assessment of a candidate first. Edward says that the change has allowed people the freedom to form their own opinions, without being influenced by their peers – or their bosses.

Even if you don’t use a software tool for hiring loops, refrain from comparing notes verbally until you have formed your own point of view on a candidate. I recommend writing down your feedback on the candidate and whether you’re inclined to hire them, before you debrief with your colleagues. Again, ask yourself as you’re writing: “How could bias have impacted my assessment and recommendation?”

Use a “flip it to test” approach

In 2017, Fortune 500 executive Kristen Pressner gave a brave TEDx talk, where she admitted to harboring gender bias against women leaders, despite identifying as a woman herself. Pressner developed a technique to disrupt bias — ask yourself, if you were to swap out the candidate from an underrepresented background with one of your more typical hires, would you have the same reaction? For example, if a woman of color candidate speaks passionately, and you're less inclined to hire her because you think of her as "angry," would you use the same word if a white man spoke the same way?

"Flip it to test it" is a relatively easy way to call out bias as it happens. In a recent hiring decision that I was part of, a highly qualified woman of color was approached to apply formally for a role she was already informally performing the duties for. Since the organization was already familiar with her work and performance, the hiring manager saw no harm in having her skip the early parts of the hiring process. But some colleagues expressed concern about "bending the rules" for her. During the discussion, I flipped the concern by asking two questions: Would we have the same reservations if we were circumventing the traditional hiring process for a white person? In the past, when all the candidates we were considering were white men, did we focus extensively on the fairness of the hiring process? In both cases, the hiring committee unanimously answered: no. We were able to recognize our bias and eventually made an offer to the candidate.

Understand how reducing bias could personally benefit you

Diversity in our workplace makes us smarter, more innovative, and promotes better critical thinking. It's not only the organization that benefits, we personally have a lot to gain by working with people from all different backgrounds. By recognizing how we benefit from reducing our own bias — rather than focusing on the ROI for the company — we're likely to be more motivated to take action.

As Gadsen-Williams told me, “A culture of equality is a multiplier. We can’t achieve a culture of equality if personal unconscious bias is not addressed first and foremost.”

Author’s note (7/16/20): I updated the language in this article because I am no longer using “diverse” to refer to a person or people. When we categorize people of color or women as “diverse,” we are centering white people and men as the accepted norm. I also updated “unconscious bias” to simply be “bias.”

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