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Cognitive Bias

Unconscious Bias Training That Works

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Mark Harris; woman: oonal/Getty Images

Summary. To become more diverse, equitable, and inclusive, many companies have turned to unconscious bias (UB) training. By raising awareness of the mental shortcuts that lead to snap judgments—often based on race and gender—about people's talents or character, it strives to... **more**

Across the globe, in response to public outcry over racist incidents in the workplace and mounting evidence of the cost of

employees' feeling excluded, leaders are striving to make their companies more diverse, equitable, and inclusive. Unconscious bias training has played a major role in their efforts. UB training seeks to raise awareness of the mental shortcuts that lead to snap judgments—often based on race and gender—about people's talents or character. Its goal is to reduce bias in attitudes and behaviors at work, from hiring and promotion decisions to interactions with customers and colleagues.

But conventional UB training isn't working, research suggests. In a 2019 meta-analysis of more than 490 studies involving some 80,000 people, the psychologist Patrick Forscher and his colleagues found that UB training did not change biased behavior. Other studies have revealed that the training can backfire: Sending the message that biases are involuntary and widespread —beyond our control, in other words—can make people feel they're unavoidable and lead to *more* discrimination, not less. In fact, in a 2006 review of more than 700 companies, Alexandra Kalev, Frank Dobbin, and Erin Kelly showed that after UB training, the likelihood that Black men and women would advance in organizations often *decreased*. It's no wonder that women and people of color continue to report high levels of unfair treatment at work.

The most effective UB training does more than increase awareness of bias and its impact. It teaches attendees to manage their biases, change their behavior, and track their progress. It gives them information that contradicts stereotypes and allows them to connect with people whose experiences are different from theirs. And it's not just a onetime education session; it entails a longer journey and structural changes to policies and operations—like the standardization of hiring processes, the elimination of self-assessments from performance reviews, and the institution of incentives for improving diversity. Rather than providing UB training as a check-the-box exercise, companies make a real, long-term commitment to it because they think it's worthy and important.

In a study we conducted at a pharmaceutical company, the results of two surveys we did, and the work of other scholars, we see the positive impact this style of UB training has. Not only do employees report heightened awareness of bias, but they also *show* less bias and prejudice weeks after the training. They start finding the workplace to be more inclusive—somewhere that differences are cherished rather than tolerated. And women, people of color, and people with disabilities report feeling a greater sense of belonging and respect for their contributions.

To unpack what drives these positive changes, we interviewed dozens of leaders—including chief human resource officers, learning and development executives, and diversity, equity, and inclusion officers—at companies that have implemented rigorous UB programs across a variety of industries. In this article we'll

share what we've learned about how they're leveraging a more practical approach to UB training. (Disclosure: One of us—Gino—has conducted antibias training at organizations as a consultant, but they include none of the companies featured in this article.)

The Flaws in Conventional Approaches

Traditional UB training falls short in a number of ways. In a recent survey we did of more than 500 working adults from a wide range of U.S. organizations, three findings stood out. First, most organizations, worried about a backlash, make UB training voluntary. As a result it's embraced only by people who are already familiar with bias and interested in reducing it. Second, 91% of the respondents indicated that their firms don't collect information on the metrics they claim to care about, such as the race and gender of new hires and recipients of promotions and employee recognition awards. It's hard to improve something you're not even tracking. Third, 87% of the respondents indicated that at their firms UB training doesn't go much past explaining the science behind bias and the costs of discrimination in organizations. In fact, only 10% of training programs gave attendees strategies for reducing bias. Imagine a weight-loss program that told participants to step on the scale and left it at that. The idea that we can reduce our bias simply by being aware of it is the fatal flaw in most UB training. In fact, most programs end exactly where they should start.

A More Effective Model

Successful UB training gives people concrete tools for changing their behavior. It helps them better understand others' experiences and feel more motivated to be inclusive.

Consider an approach that Patricia Devine of the University of Wisconsin and her colleagues have developed, called "prejudice habit-breaking." Like conventional UB training, it teaches what implicit bias is, how it's measured, and how it harms women and people of color. After being educated, participants take the Implicit Association Test, which demonstrates that we all fall prey to unconscious bias to a degree, and then get feedback on their personal level of bias. Next they're taught how to overcome bias through a combination of strategies. These include calling out stereotyped views, gathering more individualized information about people, reflecting on counterstereotypical examples, adopting the perspectives of others, and increasing interactions with different kinds of people. After learning about each strategy, participants are asked to come up with examples of how they could use it in their own lives. They're taught that the strategies reinforce one another and that the more they're practiced, the more effective they will be.

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This approach really works. In a longitudinal experiment, Devine and her colleagues had 292 college students participate in prejudice habit-breaking with a focus on race. Two weeks later the attendees noticed bias in others more than students who hadn't participated did, and were also more likely to label that bias as wrong. Two years later the researchers went back to a subset of the students and found that those who had participated were still more likely to speak out against bias than students who had not.

Using similar techniques, the same researchers trained STEM faculty at the University of Wisconsin to reduce gender bias. Afterward, departmental hiring patterns began to change. Over the next two years the proportion of female faculty hired in departments that had undergone the training rose from 32% to 47%; in departments that hadn't received the training, the hiring of women remained flat. Faculty members in participating departments—both women and men—reported feeling more comfortable bringing up family responsibilities and even that colleagues valued their research and scholarship more, an independent survey conducted months after the workshop found.

The companies we've seen get good results from UB training take an approach similar to Devine's. In addition, they have both individuals and the organization track and reflect on progress and identify where broader change is needed. We observed this at the pharmaceutical company, where we conducted a three-month study with about 400 people. Six weeks after UB training there, participants reported greater feelings of inclusion, showed less bias and prejudice, and made greater commitments to

organizational change than the employees who hadn't participated. Moreover, after the company worked to eliminate bias from its performance reviews, employees felt that they seemed fairer, and data analyses confirmed that their perception was accurate.

Now let's examine in greater depth the elements of successful UB training and the complementary measures that should be taken to reinforce its goals.

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Stress That "You Hold the Power"

UB training needs to help employees *act* on their awareness of bias. The idea is to empower them to change while cutting off their escape route—the inner voice that says, "I'm born like this, and there's nothing I can do about it." Here are some ways to do that.

Overcome denial. Even if we're aware of our bias, we're often ignorant of its extent and its consequences. A large-scale audit of human resource managers conducted by Devah Pager and Lincoln Quillian, for instance, found clear evidence of discrimination against Black candidates in hiring. Over seven months in 2001, matched pairs of 23-year-old college students were asked to apply to 350 entry-level job openings in Milwaukee that had been randomly selected from a newspaper's Sunday classified section and a state-sponsored online job site. The applicants were two white students (one with a fictional criminal

record and one without) and two Black students with the same profiles as the white applicants. The difference in the responses the applicants got was striking: Thirty-four percent of white students without records and 17% of white students with records received callbacks. Only 14% of Black students *without* records got callbacks, and a mere 5% of Black students with records did. Yet in a follow-up survey the managers indicated that they had no racial preference. Denial is widespread, but if people don't admit bias exists, they can't address it.

One of the issues is that traditional UB training tends to focus on extreme cases of abuse and harassment, giving employees another easy out: "I'd never do that," they say and tune out. While it's important to cover the extremes, training should look mostly at scenarios where leaders and employees subtly exclude others or downplay their contributions—one of the most widespread and insidious forms of bias.

Microsoft's online UB training, which is also available publicly, includes videos depicting various everyday workplace scenarios. In one, the only woman on a team tries to add her views and is interrupted multiple times until another member finally notices and asks her to speak.

Highlighting common forms of bias is also helpful when addressing more-blatant discriminatory behavior. Starbucks took an approach similar to Microsoft's when designing a new antibias training in reaction to a highly publicized 2018 incident in one of its Philadelphia stores. One day in April, two African American entrepreneurs arrived at a Starbucks store for a meeting. They sat

without ordering, waiting for a local businessman to join them. The store manager asked them to either place an order or leave, and then called 911 when they did not. The police arrived and arrested them. The chain's leadership responded by closing all 8,000 of its U.S. stores for half a day of UB training focused on race. During it, leaders gave concrete examples of how bias can show up in stores, such as when employees treat customers differently on the basis of their skin color or make assumptions about how they'll behave because of their appearance.

Focus on the potential for growth. According to the respondents in our recent survey of nearly 1,300 working adults in the United States, learning that the brain is malleable and capable of positive change is the single most effective component of antibias training. Participants need to be taught that while bias is normal, it's not acceptable or unavoidable.

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To help its employees and managers grow, the Canadian energy company Suncor encourages them to write in a "reflection notebook" about any instance in which they saw themselves

acting with bias. They're also asked to think about the life experiences that shaped their biases.

Microsoft's UB training prompts participants to think more deeply about the examples of bias depicted in its videos. For instance, one shows a team discussion of who is most suited to lead a project. After watching it, participants are asked to indicate which of various statements made during the discussion are valid: (1) Technical understanding is important when leading a technical project; (2) Cynthia's young children will make it harder for her to be fully committed to the project; (3) Ravi's introverted nature makes him an unsuitable project leader; and (4) Gerry's relaxed demeanor would not serve this project's goals. The participants learn that only the first statement is valid. There is no evidence that having children, being introverted, or having a relaxed demeanor negatively affects a project leader's effectiveness.

Provide examples of how to change behavior. Each section of Microsoft's training includes a best practice for overcoming bias, such as "examine your assumptions." Participants are told, "The next time you catch yourself making a judgment about someone's background or working preference, ask yourself, could this be an asset? This is a simple way of reframing your thinking about a person or a situation." The training also teaches employees that they can counteract bias when hiring or assigning projects by clearly identifying the requirements of a role before evaluating potential candidates.

At one public relations company, the chief diversity officer works with various divisions to examine practices like customer interactions and hiring, identify where unconscious biases are prevalent, and help employees address them. Working with human resources, she found that performance reviews were biased: Women received less helpful feedback than men did. Why? The forms included a self-assessment, which managers read before filling out the feedback forms. Women, consistent with research findings, were less likely to promote themselves and were harder on themselves than men were. By eliminating self-evaluations, HR was able to reduce bias against women in managers' feedback. Examples like this are used in the company's UB training to concretely show how bias can be effectively addressed through changes in behavior.

Break stereotypes. Stereotypes we hold about ourselves and others profoundly influence our behavior. For instance, one of us (Coffman) has found that lack of confidence in their own talent leads women in fields stereotypically considered "male," like technology, to behave in ways that can jeopardize their success, such as suggesting fewer ideas, particularly when working with men, and not applying for roles for which they are qualified. But encouraging trainees to present examples that defy stereotypes can reduce bias. In one experiment by Nilanjana Dasgupta and Anthony Greenwald, students exposed to images of admired African Americans showed a weaker preference for white individuals. In another study that Dasgupta and Shaki Asgari did, female college students were less likely to view leadership and

math as male domains after encountering female faculty members in those departments at their school.

Exposure to counterstereotypical information reduces prejudice and results in more-positive interpersonal interactions. Leaders of Corning, the manufacturer of high-tech glass and ceramics products, provide it as part of a broader initiative to address unconscious bias. Intersections, a learning site on Corning's internal community platform, hosts *Collective Voices,* a podcast series that showcases employees and leaders across the business discussing diversity, equity, and inclusion and sharing personal experiences. In some episodes employees and leaders talk about times they behaved in a biased manner—for example, by stereotyping a colleague because of his or her affiliation with a certain political or racial group. Their vulnerability helps others examine their own biases. Some of the stories have opened up discussions of counterstereotypical examples, such as women who are thriving in traditionally male roles, showing that there are ways for everyone to succeed in the organization. Since the launch of the podcast, which has become quite popular, internal surveys have revealed that employees are more comfortable talking about their mistaken views and find themselves relying less on stereotypes.

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Create Empathy

Research shows that we have less empathy for people who seem different from us and are likely to treat them worse as a result. That's why connecting with others through empathy can improve our interactions across racial, gender, and other differences. Let's look at some ways to nurture empathy.

Offer opportunities to take the perspective of others. We don't put ourselves in someone else's shoes naturally, much research finds, but doing so can lead to greater interest in others' welfare and more-positive relationships. In laboratory studies, instructing participants to take another person's point of view has been found to reduce bias against stigmatized groups, such as African Americans, and to suppress unconscious prejudices. In one study a group of white Americans watched clips from the movie *The Joy Luck Club* and were asked to put themselves in the place of the Chinese American heroine, June. In comparison with a control group, participants later showed less implicit prejudice toward "outgroups" (people who were not like them). During the UB training at Starbucks, attendees who were shown videos in which employees from minority groups told their stories were asked to adopt the perspective of those colleagues.

Hold small group discussions. These create opportunities for people to learn about others' views and experiences. About every seven weeks, as part of an ongoing training called the Third Place development series, Starbucks provides new guided UB learning and discussion modules, which are delivered on iPads in its stores for retail employees and on the company's intranet for the rest of the workforce. The topics are crowdsourced from leaders of

different departments, including human resources, employee development, and inclusion and diversity. But employees also can suggest areas where they feel they could use more education and support. Employees are given time off to go through each module in groups of three to five people and discuss the questions it poses. Each session is 30 minutes for baristas and other nonmanagement employees, and 60 minutes for managers and above.

Discussions can also occur virtually. On Corning's Intersections site, employees talk about issues related to inclusion in an online forum, where a moderator is available to answer questions and provide resources.

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Encourage Interactions Among People from Different Groups

These can be a powerful antidote to bias. Research shows that white people who've had few interracial encounters often experience anxiety when interacting with Black people and try to avoid them altogether. But forming relationships with members of other groups can widen our social networks, decrease our stress around people who are different from us, and reduce our prejudices. Here are some effective methods for building them.

Expand inner circles. Training sessions themselves can help people get to know colleagues who are unlike them, even when the sessions are virtual. In our survey of nearly 1,300 working

adults, respondents said they benefited from the opportunities that training offered to interact with diverse colleagues and to examine whom they had contact with most often. The success of this kind of effort is obviously tied to how diverse a workforce is in the first place. The fact that it can cause discomfort should not be a barrier. Research has shown that moderate discomfort is a critical catalyst for the introspection that can lead to more-egalitarian behavior.

At Starbucks pulse surveys and interviews with employees revealed that the discussions about the UB modules, which were open to all employees, allowed colleagues with different experiences and backgrounds to learn about one another and create new connections and made workers more empathetic.

Nurture curiosity. The natural desire to acquire new knowledge and information can reduce prejudice and discriminatory behavior, research by Gino finds. (See "The Business Case for Curiosity," September–October 2018.) Curiosity prompts us to get to know our colleagues better rather than make assumptions. UB training can encourage it by having people work together in diverse teams. At its UB training the multinational professional services firm EY assigns colleagues from varying cultural backgrounds to teams and encourages them to ask one another questions, find out what bias means to each person, and explore how to overcome it together.

Mark Harris; brain: sdecoret/Getty Images; eye: medlar/Getty Images; x-ray: oonal/Getty Images

Starbucks organizes regular sessions featuring outside speakers, from successful Black entrepreneurs to well-regarded influencers who belong to other minority groups or have disabilities. The aim is to spark interest in people whose experiences employees may not be familiar with. Attendees are invited to practice asking curious questions.

Urge employees to track their interactions. UB training should encourage people to reflect on how they spend their time at work and with whom. When they're handing out assignments, do their choices indicate bias? Whom do they gravitate toward in brainstorming sessions and spontaneous conversations?

When Gino coached a group of leaders on unconscious bias, she asked them to review their calendars to see whom they had met with in the previous month and whom they invited to meetings, and to think back about whom they called on to speak during those meetings. The data was eye-opening: People of color were not invited to meetings as often as white individuals, were called on less frequently in meetings they did attend, and met informally with their bosses less often. And when managers at a financial services firm analyzed investment opportunities and deals they'd passed on to colleagues, they found evidence of gender bias: More men than women were offered those opportunities.

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Encourage Good Practices and Continued Learning

If leaders want their organizations to become more equitable and diverse, they need to help employees implement the lessons of UB training. Here are some measures they can encourage people to take.

Commit to improvement. UB training should offer leaders and employees alike time to thoughtfully consider their motivations for reducing bias. Some may want to gain a reputation for always striving to be inclusive. Some might buy into an organizational goal such as better serving diverse customers by creating a diverse workforce. Or they may want to address UB simply because it's the right thing to do. No matter what the goal, choosing a specific reason for a commitment is a first step toward improvement.

Choosing to commit is easier when participants see evidence of how unconscious bias affects their work. For instance, a large company that Gino worked with showed racial bias in performance evaluations. After HR directors reviewed the data, they and the company's senior leaders committed to eliminating unfair practices.

Find a mentor and solicit feedback. We often lack a clear sense of our own bias and how it affects others. One male leader we coached learned from a trusted colleague that in meetings he frequently interrupted people—primarily women—and often attributed women's ideas to their male colleagues. Once his eyes had been opened, he began paying closer attention to how he managed meetings.

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At UB training, participants might identify a mentor who could observe their behavior for bias or advise them on how to solicit feedback from others. Team members may feel more comfortable providing input anonymously or may appoint one person to monitor meetings for signs of bias. Accepting that we're biased isn't easy, but learning from feedback is key to becoming more inclusive.

Track improvement. It's crucial to hold people accountable by monitoring whether behaviors truly change over time. When the leaders at the pharmaceutical company tracked their practices, they saw differences in their promotion patterns during the two years after their UB training. Similarly, the managers at the financial services firm were more unbiased and fair in their assignment of deals after they started tracking whom they passed their deals on to.

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Set a Broader Strategy for Broader Impact

When organizations make a broad commitment to fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion, employees' buy-in increases. In our survey of more than 500 employees, participants reported taking UB training more seriously when it was accompanied by

resounding institutional support demonstrated through thoughtfulness, time, and money. Here's how organizations can provide such support.

Build the foundations. First, organizations can collect data on the representation and dispersion of people from different groups across the business, employees' perceptions of inclusion, and where diversity-related process failures might be occurring (such as during hiring or performance reviews). That data will suggest which training topics might have the greatest impact on employees. Leaders can also establish a committee to oversee and report on progress toward diversity, equity, and inclusion goals. These endeavors will need dependable funding. At Starbucks, which has made a multiyear financial commitment to reducing bias, Molly Hill, the company's vice president of learning, development, and partner experience, says it speaks volumes that her team doesn't need to ask for a training budget every year—the money is allocated to the initiative by default.

Measure the effectiveness of UB training. This is critical to improving the training over time. It involves, first, gathering data on engagement with the training itself. Microsoft does that with participant surveys and by studying what makes employees, teams, and units most likely to consume UB training content. Starbucks similarly assesses engagement with antibias materials through pulse surveys of employees.

Second, organizations must track the outcomes they're trying to change. To promote improvements, companies like Microsoft and Corning publish demographic employment data in public reports each year. Starbucks tracks customer engagement with employees in different stores, asking whether their efforts are improving customer experiences.

Asking employees directly affected by bias to share their experiences before and after companywide UB training can also help leaders understand whether meaningful change is occurring. One way to do this would be through surveys done just before and few months after the training.

Nudge people to make better decisions. After training, organizations can establish what behavioral scientists call "nudges"—measures that prompt people to engage in new strategies. For example, before managers write performance reviews, they might be reminded to avoid giving feedback about employees' personalities. Recruiters might be asked to reflect on key job requirements before discussing candidates. In these ways organizations can ensure that training lessons influence employees' everyday behavior.

Review and rethink policies. The leaders of Starbucks revised store policies that they believed led employees in Philadelphia to call the police on the two Black men. The company issued clear guidelines stating that everyone was welcome to spend time in its stores, with or without making a purchase. And employees facing a challenging situation were encouraged to move beyond their gut

reaction by consulting a checklist, considering the context, and seeking advice from others before taking action. Store managers were taught to ask, "Would I take this action with any customer in the same circumstances?"

As Starbucks recognized, UB training alone can't stamp out bias. Systemic changes are needed as well. Leaders should revise long-standing practices that unfairly disadvantage certain groups, such as relying on unstructured interviews or self-assessments. When managers at the financial services firm realized there was a gender bias in the way they assigned deals, they instituted a regular review to ensure that it stopped happening.

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Leaders' desire for their companies to be more diverse, equitable, and inclusive has never seemed stronger. But conventional UB training programs aren't delivering the changes they're supposed to produce. By following our blueprint, organizations can create programs that inspire people to more courageously examine and improve their behavior. By replacing superficial, one-shot training with longer-term efforts that do a better job of helping people understand their own unconscious biases and see how to overcome them and measure their progress, leaders can turn their workplaces into environments where everyone truly feels a sense of belonging and appreciation.

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