



UNCONSCIOUS BIAS AND ITS IMPACT ON LEADERSHIP DECISION MAKING

#FSAE18 KEYNOTE



BY DR. SHIRLEY DAVIS

It couldn't be more appropriate to address unconscious bias than at a time we are experiencing significant demographic disruptions, polarization and divisiveness, globalization,

and political discord. This two-part article attempts to introduce this topic as a leadership competency as well as an organizational strategy.

Everyone has bias. It's a part of the human make up. We need bias to protect us from danger. Biologically we are hard-wired to prefer people who look like us, sound like us and share our interests. But when left unchecked, biases can have a negative impact in every interaction. With the vast amount of diversity that makes up our global workforce, including more women, people of color, LGBTQ, veterans, introverts and extroverts, immigrants, people with different abilities, thinking styles, and personalities, and five generations, to name a few – the level of complexity and potential conflicts that can arise from unconscious bias

“Unconscious bias is a **spontaneous judgment, positive or negative, that occurs within 3-5 seconds** of encountering a person. Attitudes or stereotypes are reinforced over time, and affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner.”

is sure to increase. Every day, decisions are made in the workplace -- including sourcing, selection, development, pay, promotions, terminations, assigning projects, constructing teams and creating business strategy. Whether we recognize it or not, unconscious bias enters into every one of these decisions.

Having worked in Human Resources for over 20 years, I am intimately aware of how leaders think, behave and make decisions about all aspects of the employee experience. In particular, I've worked with hiring managers as they reviewed candidates from diverse backgrounds and I've heard comments such as, “She didn't look me in the eye or shake my hand with a firm handshake so I don't think

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she's cut out to lead this team," or "We need a Millennial for this new project on technology," or "This job requires a demanding schedule and I don't think she could be available." In other instances, leaders may assign special projects to team members who think like them, or invite only the guys to the golf outing assuming the women on the team wouldn't be interested, or delegate administrative tasks such as notetaking or ordering lunch to the only female in the meeting. **These are both overt and subtle forms of bias and both can have a negative impact on the workplace culture and perceptions of fairness.**

Unconscious bias is an opinion, positive or negative, we have about a group or person. It occurs when we make spontaneous judgments about people or situations based on our past experiences, culture, background or exposure to media. These spontaneous judgments occur within 3-5 seconds of encountering a person. The attitudes or stereotypes that develop early in life (as early as 1-6 years old), are reinforced over time, and affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner.

WHAT CAN LEADERS DO

It is not enough to be aware that everyone has bias and therefore assume we are off the hook. All leaders, particularly people-managers, have a responsibility to ensure that their biases don't negatively impact employment-related decisions. They should practice mindfulness — STOP, PAUSE and THINK before making these decisions and be more

intentional about valuing diversity and learning how to LEAD across differences. They should learn how to leverage the gifts and talents of ALL employees, recognizing that great talent comes in all shapes, sizes, colors, preferences, backgrounds and ethnicities.

WHAT CAN ORGANIZATIONS DO

The first step in managing unconscious bias in the workplace is to **ensure employees understand exactly what unconscious bias is, when it happens and the ways in which it can impact how they work and treat each other.** Educating employees formally through training and informally through multiple communication methods is the start of what should be a continuous learning process.

Employees should also know that they are a part of shaping the culture into an inclusive, welcoming and collaborative workplace.

In the next issue, I will conclude this two-part series with how to move from Unconscious Bias to Intentional Inclusive Leadership. ◆

Dr. Shirley Davis is a well-respected thought leader and keynote speaker on the changing global workforce and culture transformation. She is the author of "The Seat: How to Get Invited to the Table When You're Over-Performing and Undervalued." Learn more about her at www.drshirleydavis.com.

FROM THE CHAIRS CONTINUED

Mary Malone has done a yeoman's job of bringing together a talented team to create provocative programming, a deep well of sponsorships and an embarrassment of riches in entertainment.

A huge thank you to the Education Committee, co-chaired by Sue Fern and Lonny Powell, which has really pushed the envelope with keynotes, practical continuing education and visionary speakers. Marketing Chair Cheryl James and her creative team developed both the 2018 logo, tag lines, social media strategy and video marketing that reflect not just change navigation but change management.

Of course, no conference is complete without the Silent Auction, this year Chaired by Carrie Millar. The Big Tickets are a REALLY BIG DEAL this year and competition for the winning tickets will be fierce.

And finally, our hosts, the Fort Lauderdale Marriott Harbor Beach Resort and Spa, represented well by Claudia Lupo, has "arms wide open" to welcome FSAE members to the newly renovated and beachside Resort.

Beyond Conference, committee work continues apace. The newly constituted Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Task Force continues to gather baseline data on member demographics. Some immediate results of the Task Force's efforts include input and suggested criteria to the Foundation Grant Committee for the new Hilton Diversity and Inclusion Grant. They also assisted the Education committee in securing Dr. Shirley Davis, CSP as the opening keynote speaker on Unconscious Bias in Leadership Decision Making. We are truly walking the walk in our efforts to ensure diversity, equity and inclusion in thought and action.

See you in July! ◆