The Most Costly Barriers
to an Inclusive Organization

When you knock down these roadblocks, employee morale will soar.

By Natalie Holder

To recruit and retain talented employees, leaders know they must focus their efforts on diversity and inclusion. Many nonprofit leaders, however, feel stuck in their diversity mission. That's often because they don't understand how diversity differs from inclusion. Here's the difference:

- **Diversity** is like being invited to sit at a table that's already set.

- **Inclusion** is being asked to partner with the host and help set up the table.

Do you remember what your high school cafeteria looked, sounded, and smelled like? You probably had a group of friends that you ate lunch with every day. Imagine that one day, you asked a different group if you could sit with them and they enthusiastically made room for you. However, after a few minutes at this new table, you noticed that you

> **Leaders often don't understand how diversity differs from inclusion.**

weren't part of the conversation. People were making plans for the weekend without asking if you would like to join them. When you tried to tell a joke, everyone stared at you dismissively. People talked over you and cut you off mid-sentence. Although you were invited to sit at the table, *you weren't invited to engage at the table.* Many organizations do a great job of recruiting for the diversity they seek, but fail to create inclusive environments.

Knowing the benefits of an inclusive work environment, why do some organizations still operate with a mindset of exclusivity? Studies show that it's natural for people to create in-groups based on their similarities. The more people perceive someone to be different, the less likely that they are to trust them – thus putting them in their out-group.

Often, without even realizing it, people engage in micro-inequities that are driven by their unconscious biases. Micro-inequities are the subtle gestures, comments, and interactions that make you feel included or excluded by another. It's feeling ignored when you're talking to someone and they glance at their watch. It's being left off an e-mail chain when you should have been included. Think of micro-inequities as the waves that threaten to erode your beautiful beach house that sits on wooden stilts. Over time, the waves

deteriorate the wooden stilts, often in ways that are unseen by the eye.

Once you're aware of this tendency toward bias, you can fight against it. You can make a concerted effort to break down in-groups and out-groups so that everyone feels included. Knocking down the following five roadblocks to inclusion will drive the overall quality of your staff and have a positive impact throughout your organization.

1. Mentoring

Although mentoring can be one of the most motivational programs you offer to your employees, it can also be a major stumbling block. To make sure that mentoring fosters rather than hinders inclusion, it's important that the mentoring relationship be carefully set up and monitored. Improperly developed mentoring programs, or informal mentoring that includes only one or two employees and excludes the rest, can erode trust, engagement, and productivity.

Informal mentoring is a self-selecting process where a senior leader chooses to guide the career development of a junior colleague. The natural inclination is for leaders to be drawn to people like themselves, thus creating an in-group and an out-group. To challenge this impulse, think about the person you feel adds the greatest diversity to your team and ask yourself, "When was the last time I invited this person out for coffee or gave this person feedback on an assignment?" If your answers are consistent with your answers for employees who are comfortably in your in-group, then you're on the right track. If not, an outing for coffee or informal feedback are solid steps in the right direction.

You can also spawn an inclusive culture through a formal mentoring program if you design it the right way. Consider these keys to successful mentoring:

Give mentees input into the process. Form a pool of people willing to be mentors, and let mentees choose from that pool so that they have a say in who will mentor them.

Make sure expectations are clear. Have mentors and mentees agree on basic rules, such as where, when, and how often they'll meet.

Include training in communication and interpersonal relationships for both mentors and mentees.

2. Recovering from Mistakes

A key part of an organization's culture is the way it deals with mistakes. Studies have shown that we have a greater tendency to blame external factors when one of our in-group members makes a mistake – for example, understanding that a report was late because the printer was broken. However, we tend to attribute out-group members' mistakes to their personal flaws – that is, a broken printer is no excuse because there were ample days to complete the report. If unchecked, this tendency creates an environment in which discriminatory discipline is part of the unwritten rules of the workplace.

Leaders can counteract this tendency toward bias and boost motivation by treating all mistakes as learning opportunities rather than as shameful failings. If you encourage everyone to dissect errors in order to learn and share important lessons, you'll engender an inclusive, engaged, and creative environment.

3. Bullying

Yelling, sending abusive e-mails, and assassinating the character of other employees are just some of the tactics workplace bullies use to usurp the power base in an organization. Bullies target people who don't have strong allies and thus seem vulnerable. Bullying destroys team-building and decreases work productivity.

Be on the lookout for bullying and be clear that it won't be tolerated. Be sure you have a feedback process that gives people a place to report instances of bullying, and respond quickly and decisively to any such reports.

4. Insensitivity

Organizations often don't realize how changes in their employee and client demographics may require a few tweaks to the organization's social traditions. The jokes, comments, and even events that were once part of the culture may be offensive to new employees.

Insensitivity can become a source of workplace stress, which can result in burnout, low morale – even drug use and violence. Ultimately, insensitivity can expose organizations to costly employment lawsuits. The manager who ignores complaints of insensitive conduct is just as guilty as the person who makes the objectionable comment or gesture.

5. Perceived Underperformance

People act based on their beliefs, creating perceptions, which – whether false or true – become reality. When you unconsciously believe that employees in an out-group are less skilled, less qualified, or less talented, you look for affirmation of these beliefs.

If you start a relationship from the premise that an employee isn't going to succeed, you create a self-fulfilling prophesy. People know when little is expected of them and behave accordingly.
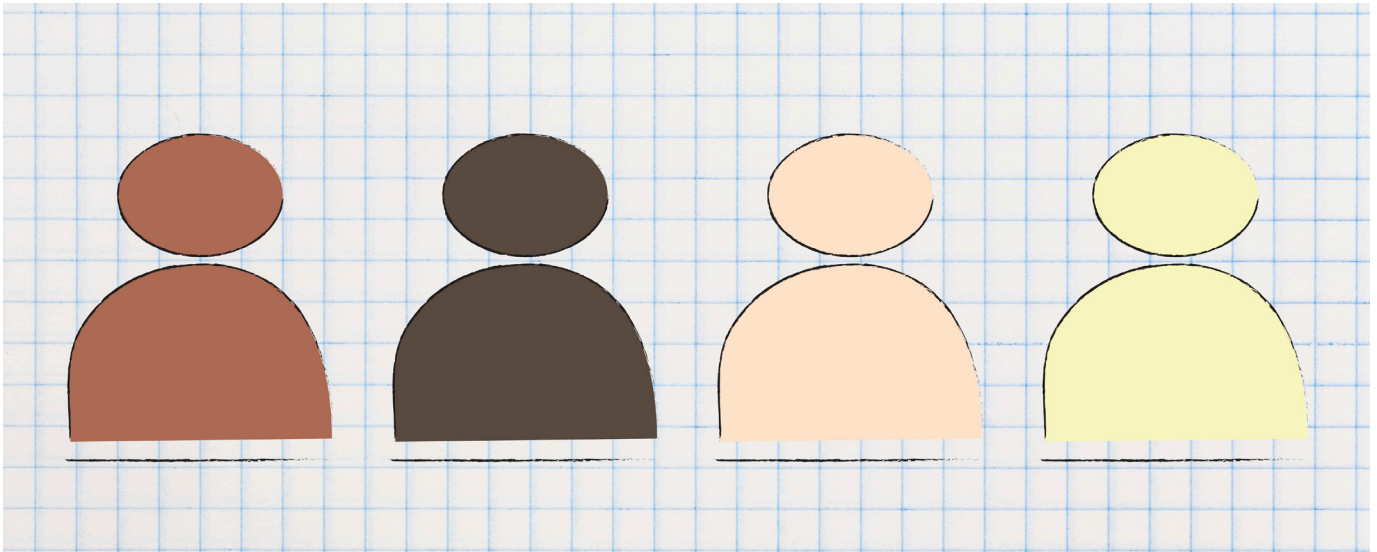
Sometimes those who bring diversity to the office might not be appreciated because their managers and coworkers are considering the *person doing the work* and not the *content of the work*. When your subjective perception about someone interferes with their objective performance, everyone loses.

Be Strategic in Your Approach

Training and other strategic steps can move your organization in the right direction toward diversity and inclusion. Increased productivity, improved reputation, and employee engagement are just a few of the huge returns on your investment of time and resources when knocking down these five inclusion barriers. $

> "**Changes in demographics may require tweaks to the organization's social traditions.**"

Shape a Culture of Inclusion

For more on becoming an inclusive organization, see articles such as these at NonprofitWorld.org:

Is Your Organization Culturally Competent? (Vol. 26, No. 6)

How to Change the World by Changing Your Culture (Vol. 31, No. 2)

The Need for Anti-Bias Policies (Vol. 22, No. 5)

What Followers Want from Leaders: Capitalizing on Diversity (Vol. 25, No. 5)

Managers Must Become Multicultural (Vol. 20, No. 6)

The Failure of Diversity Training (Vol. 18, No. 3)

Natalie Holder is an employment lawyer, speaker, corporate trainer, and author of Exclusion: Strategies for Increasing Diversity in Recruitment, Retention, and Promotion. *As the co-founder of the New York State Bar Association's Labor & Employment's Diversity Fellowship she developed strategies to increase diversity and retention within the Bar by 200%. For more information, visit QuestDiversity.com.*

THREE CRUCIAL QUESTIONS FOR REVEALING UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

3

To uncover bias in the workplace – and eventually eradicate it – start by asking yourself these three questions:

Is there an employee – or a number of employees – who would view your feedback as negative if you give them any feedback at all?

Who in the organization do you dislike working with?

Who makes you think or say, "I'm having such a difficult time getting to know this person"?

Most likely the person or people who surface in your responses are feeling excluded from your work groups. Make an extra effort to challenge your behavior with these people. Bring your actions with them into line with the way you treat your favorite employee.

Even those with the best intentions have difficulty tying their words to their actions. To frame an inclusive culture, you need to shake your unconscious mind awake and question yourself on a regular basis.