Why Microinequities Matter & How to Deal with Them

Don't let unconscious biases impede success.

By Steve Yacovelli

Three fun facts:

Studies show that resumes with "white" sounding names (like "Greg") were 50% more likely to get a callback for a job interview than more stereotypically African-American sounding names (like "Jamal"), even when the resumes were identical aside from the name.

Brunette and redheaded women's salaries are approximately 7% less than their blonde counterparts.

Almost 60% of corporate CEOs are over six feet tall. That's a huge disproportion considering that less than 15% of American men are over this height.

What do these three factoids have in common? They're examples of unconscious biases. Such biases are insidious because of their hidden, reflexive nature.

How can you manage these biases so you're making the right decisions in your workplace? Let's explore.

What is "Unconscious Bias"?

Hidden or unconscious bias is the preference for or against a person, thing, or group held at an unconscious level. This means you don't even realize your mind is holding onto this bias of, say, that person on the phone who is speaking English as a second language, or that effeminate man in front of you at the restaurant who isn't what you were taught is "masculine." In contrast, an overt – or explicit – bias is an attitude someone endorses at a conscious level; it's obvious and blatant.

Research on hidden bias shows that, regardless of the best intentions, most people hold deep-seated resistance to the "difference" of others. That difference may be defined by evident factors such as race, gender, ethnicity, age, or physical characteristics, or more subtle ones such as background, personality type, experiences, or sexual orientation.

Bias can also exist in a positive sense: You may favor your family, community, and people with whom you feel a connection based on shared characteristics or experiences (such as people who went to the same university as you).

Hidden biases aren't purposely created. They're products of your brain's self-generated definition of normal, acceptable, or positive. They can be shaped by many factors, from your past experiences to the influence of your cultural environment and impressions from media.

> **"How do we manage that 99.9999996% gap?"**

You don't consciously create these definitions of "normal" versus "different," "good" versus "bad," or "acceptable" versus "unacceptable." In fact, conscious and unconscious biases are often divergent: Your hidden biases may exist despite your sincere desire to be bias-free and in contrast to the attitudes you believe you have.

Why Do We Have These Biases?

We can blame our unconscious biases on our cave ancestors. Back in the day, a cave person had to quickly decide if the big, furry, sharp-toothed animal at the cave door was friend or foe; and those quick assumptions were processed in their cave brains.

Science has shown that we receive 11 million bits of information every moment, but we can only consciously process 40 bits of data at any time. How do we manage that 99.9999996% gap? Through our unconscious brains. So, as humans it's perfectly natural for us to create these cognitive shortcuts to help us be safe and manage all this data input.

But today we aren't cave folk, and that wiring sometimes goes against what we want our auto systems to do. Think about it: Do you want your cave wiring taking over who you work with, the feelings you have toward hiring someone, or how you act toward a co-worker? No, you don't. You want to rely on your conscious brain, and that's not always easy to do. But it's something you *should* do.

Why Microinequities Matter in Your Workplace

OK: you're at work and someone says to you, "For a woman, you did a really good job on that task." Some would call this a back-handed compliment – a compliment that's really an insult. The better term for this is a microinequity. Microinequities come to life when people say things that tip the hand on their unconscious biases.

Why does it matter for you to identify and mitigate these microinequities in your workplace? For several reasons:

Microinequities are a form of punishment for being different and occur in the context of work without regard to performance or merit.

They undermine the effectiveness of the recipient.

Put Me in, Coach!

Although it's targeted to LGBTQ+ leaders, the insights and wit in *Pride Leadership* (publishyourpurpose.com) will entertain and enlighten any leader. Steve Yacovelli touches on every vital aspect of leadership – and does so in unique ways.

For instance, in a section on coaching, he provides a model to clarify what it means to be a coach and how it differs from being a mentor, therapist, or counselor. He suggests that you draw a large + in the middle of a piece of paper. At the top of the vertical line write "Your Job More Ask" and at the bottom "Your Job More Tell." On the horizontal line on the left, write "Focus Problem" and on the right, "Focus Solution."

- The upper-left quadrant – where your job is to ask more questions and focus on a problem – is *therapy.* The therapist asks questions to get to the root of a person's problem.
- The lower-left quadrant –where the focus is on the problem but your job is to tell – is *counseling.*
- The lower-right quadrant – where the focus is on a solution and your job is to tell – is *mentoring.* Mentors give advice about what mentees should do to achieve their goals.
- The upper-right quadrant – where the focus is on a solution and your job is to ask questions – is *coaching.*

It's tempting, as a coach, to fall into the mentoring role ("Here's what you should do"), but the coach's job is to ask open-ended questions to help people come to their own conclusions. Examples of good coaching questions:

- What's on your mind? (Follow this question with "What else?" to probe deeper.)
- What's the real challenge here for you?
- What do you want?
- What have you found most useful?
- How can I help?

Use these questions as tools to create an organizational culture of openness, equality, and trust, Yacovelli says. As a coaching leader, you can play a pivotal role in achieving a unified, inclusive culture that allows every employee to thrive.
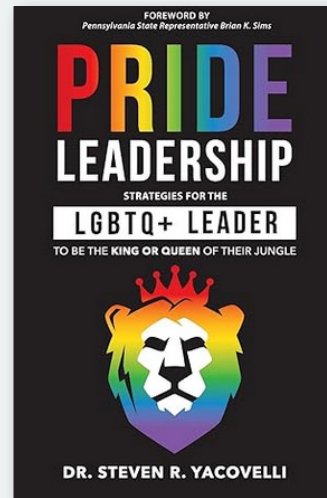
They take up workplace time and energy and undermine interpersonal trust and relationships.

Studies have found that over 71% of the workforce has experienced some form of workplace incivility or microinequity in the last five years.[1] What happened to these folks? According to this study:

• **53% lost work time worrying** about the incident.

• **28% lost work time** avoiding the instigator.

• **37% decreased their commitment** at work.

• **10% decreased the amount of time** they spent at work.

• **12% actually changed jobs** to avoid the instigator.

How Can You Limit Microinequities?

What do you do about managing your unconscious cave self? Luckily, there are proven steps you can take:

ACCEPT THE TRUTH ABOUT YOUR BIASES

First of all, admit to yourself that you *do* have unconscious biases, and become aware of the ones you hold. One of the best ways to explore your hidden biases is through Project Implicit or the Implicit-Association Test (IAT). The IAT is a free online assessment that will measure the strength of your hidden biases. Check it out – in a safe and judgment-free way – at the Project Implicit website.[2]

DISCUSS

Share the concepts of unconscious bias and microinequities with others in your workplace. Encourage them to check out the Project Implicit website.[2] Talk about the results you had on the site. Ask co-workers to hold each other accountable when those unconscious biases turn into microinequities.

LOOK AT THE BIGGER PICTURE

Take a wide view of your organization. What are the biases that exist in your workplace, and how can you challenge them? For example, look at your organization's recruiting practices.

Do you tend to hire the same types of people and recruit from the same places?

Are your marketing messages non-inclusive?

Are your board members similar in demographic make-up?

Think as a team about your practices to ensure your collective biases aren't impacting your organization's success.

Eliminate Resistance to Change

We all harbor unconscious bias to some extent. And that's OK; it simply means we're human. The important thing is what we do to change ourselves and our workplace.

What steps do we take to de-bias ourselves?

How do we share that action with others?

> **"Are your board members similar in demographic make-up?"**

How do we alter organizational processes that reinforce bias?

How do we work together to make our organization welcoming and inclusive?

The key is to understand that we all resist change. We can overcome this resistance only with patience and time. We can't force change on others. Only when everyone is on board with this new way of looking at things will our workplaces become more fair and inclusive.

Taking these steps will make your organization more successful. It will also build trust between you and others. And that makes the world just a little bit better. 🄢

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FOOTNOTES

[1] "Workplace Incivility & the Management of Human Capital," *Public Manager* (Vol. 31).

[2] Log in to Project Implicit (implicit.harvard.edu/implicit) to find out your implicit associations about race, gender, sexual orientation, and other topics.