

Unconscious Bias: A Reality Of The Truth



Bobbi Kloss is the Director of Human Capital Management Services for the Benefit Advisors Network – an exclusive, national network of independent employee benefit brokerage and consulting companies. For more information, please visit: www.benefitadvisorsnetwork.com or email the author at bkloss@benefitadvisorsnetwork.com.

Bobbi will be discussing this topic further on a webinar entitled, HCM Trends: Catalyst to Conversation – Diversity & Inclusion, taking place on September 17, 2020 at 12:00 Noon, Eastern. Andrea Dunn, BAN Agency Administrator and Michelle Filler, Director of Client Services Forum for BAN, will also be presenting. For more information and to register: <https://benefitadvisorsnetwork.com/blog/diversityandinclusionwebinar/>

Events shaping our country today including the #MeTooMovement, Black Lives Matter, the disparate impact of Black and Latino populations affected by COVID-19, the Supreme Court decision in BOSTOCK v. CLAYTON COUNTY, GEORGIA recognizing sexual identity within the LGQBT community as a protected sex discrimination class bring a reality of the truth that an honest appraisal of diversity and inclusion in the workplace should occur.

Diversity is as age-old as humankind and refers to the traits and characteristics that make people unique. Differences occur in man versus woman, nationality versus nationality, religion versus religion, race versus race, developmentally or physically disabled versus able-bodied and youth versus the elderly and in every other way that makes each of us so uniquely designed.

As employers, when we hire employees, we first seek out the best-qualified person to perform the duties of the position. Unknowingly though, we may be establishing a separation in our workforce. We can make assumptions that the best hires are men in engineering positions, Asians in mathematical positions, Indians in IT positions, and women in administrative positions.

These assumptions are unconscious biases.

Secondly, all employers want employees who will work collaboratively to support the culture of the organization. However, organizations receive more than the skills and qualifications of the hired candidate. Once an employee shows up for work, the employer also receives all of the inherent and acquired personality traits of the employee including their “prejudice in favor of or against one thing, person, or group compared with another, usually in a way considered to be unfair.”

These prejudices are unconscious biases.

Both the assumptions and prejudices that are brought into all levels of the workforce can create a division among its employees instead of all working towards common goals.

Protection Against Discrimination

How do these unconscious biases hurt the workplace? When it comes to the workplace where we are hired to work together for the common good of driving the business mission forward we are often at odds with those who we perceive differently. We find that discrimination can occur in every stage of employment including hiring, performance management, pay equity, peer relationships, and supervisory management practices.

The ability of those in the workplace to create an environment in which discriminatory treatment of others who are different is so widespread that federal, state, and local laws exist for the protection of those who are discriminately treated. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VII), was originally enacted to protect employees against discrimination for race, color, national origin, and religion.

Title VII has been amended and other laws passed to add further protection from discriminatory treatment, making it:

Illegal to discriminate against a job applicant or an employee because of the person's race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy, gender identity, and sexual orientation), national origin, age (40 or older), disability or genetic information. It is also illegal to discriminate against a person because the person complained about discrimination, filed a charge of discrimination, or participated in an employment discrimination investigation or lawsuit.

Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) policies similar to the following begin to set the culture of the company.

Equal Employment Opportunity

The Company is an equal opportunity employer. We will extend equal opportunity to all individuals without regard to race, religion, color, sex (including pregnancy, sexual orientation, and gender identity), national origin, disability, age, genetic information, or any other status protected under applicable federal, state, or local laws. Our policy reflects and affirms the Company's commitment to the principles of fair employment and the elimination of all discriminatory practices.

Having an EEO policy is not enough. While we all should be treated as equal, diversity and inclusion cultures additionally welcome and promote the uniqueness in each of us and provide the mechanism for a workplace where "all individuals are treated fairly and respectfully, have equal access to opportunities and resources, and can contribute fully to the organization's success." Such a commitment would like the following:

Commitment to Diversity & Inclusion

The Company is committed to creating and maintaining a workplace in which all employees have an opportunity to participate and contribute to the success of the business and are valued for their skills, experience, and unique perspectives. This commitment is embodied in company policy and the way we do business and is an important principle of sound business management.

While an organization through its management practices appears to treat all employees as equal, unconscious biases can alternatively provide a real or perceived sense of exclusion in our ability to treat each other non-discriminately. A policy alone cannot eliminate the unconscious biases that exist working against a culture that embodies a workplace where people want to work. How does a company promote and support diversity and inclusion in the workplace?

The Diversity & Inclusion Program

It is prudent to first take a look at the organization as it sits today.

1. C-Suite recognizes that an organization's greatest asset is its employees
2. Employee retention is a proper mindset
3. Consumer loyalty is critical to business growth
4. C-Suite commits to EEO in all business practices
5. Evaluate the company diversity and inclusion dynamics in the present moment
 - a. What is the staff ratio based upon EEO demographics?
 - i. Hiring
 - ii. Promotions
 - iii. Pay practices including hiring, raises
 - b. What is EEO demographic make-up of my applicant pool for each geographic location?
 - c. What is turnover and related cost ratios?
 - d. What are employee perceptions of company policy and practices?
 - e. What are the EEO demographics of the company consumer/customer base?

- f. Evaluate corrective counseling for trends in:
 - i. Consistent Supervisors/Department
 - ii. Reasons for poor performance
 - iii. Employee responses
- g. What programs are in place supporting diversity and inclusion?
 - i. What employee engagement involvement exists for developing, promoting, and reviewing?
 - ii. How is success measured?

Employers who are committed to a diverse and inclusive workplace should be prepared to address any barriers that exist within the organization. It will be important to survey all levels of employees for a proper perspective. Having a committee represented by all levels of the company will help to explore ways to make awareness, acceptance, and action relevant and impactful to the dynamics of the organization.