

White Paper

Achieving Inclusion through Cultural Awareness and Cultural Competency

Diversity Only Thrives in an Inclusive Environment

The benefits of diversity in the workplace include faster problem-solving, better decision-making, increased innovation, employee engagement, and better financial performance.^{1,2} Yet diversity can only deliver on its full potential when it exists in a genuinely inclusive environment. An organizational culture that does not make talented diverse employees feel valued and supported is certain to lose them.

Inclusion, then, is the mechanism for achieving sustained diversity. It relies on *cultural awareness* and the people and communication skills involved in *cultural competency*.

Cultural awareness refers to the ability to recognize and appreciate the nuances of culture and background – both one's own and those of others – and it is at the heart of societies, communities, and organizations that aspire to be equitable and inclusive for all of their members.

We are not born with an innate ability to navigate diversity with ease, in fact our brains are wired to mistrust differences with others, that leads us all naturally to develop biases. Because of that, to become effective, trusted leaders within our organizations and communities, we first need to become students of culture. That is, we need to develop competency in effectively understanding, communicating with, and interacting with people whose backgrounds and culture may be different from our own.³

Bias: Nature's Blessing and Its Curse

There is no shame in acknowledging that we have biases. They are impossible to avoid entirely and are rooted in nature's desire that our brains be equipped in the most efficient way to help us survive and adapt to complex social living.⁴

But as is sometimes the case, a trait or behavior that has evolved over time for one type of situation can be a problem in another, and that is the case with bias in modern society.

People experience affinities for others they perceive to be like themselves, and research has now shown that the brain itself responds accordingly. This tendency to favor those we see as in our own group (in-group bias) may occur with affinities based on age, gender, profession, nationality, race, ethnicity, favorite sports team, social group, education or any number of other factors. Scientists have discovered that the neural mechanisms of our brains react differently to those in our in-group: we perceive their faces differently, categorize them differently, empathize at a different level, and experience their actions differently.⁵

We can't change our neuroscience. Our responsibility is to recognize our biases – whether conscious or unconscious (implicit) – and to do our best to mitigate any negative effects they may have on others and the organizations and institutions we serve.

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¹ Eswaran, Vijay. "The Business Case for Diversity Is Now Overwhelming. Here's Why." *World Economic Forum*, 29 Apr. 2019. www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/04/business-case-for-diversity-in-the-workplace.

² Bersin, Josh. "Why Diversity and Inclusion Has Become a Business Priority." *JOSH BERSIN*, 16 Mar. 2019. joshbersin.com/2015/12/why-diversity-and-inclusion-will-be-a-top-priority-for-2016.

³ Neuroscience News. "Why Our Brains See the World As "Us" Versus "Them"" *Neuroscience News*, 24 June 2018. neurosciencenews.com/neuroscience-bias-9431.

⁴ Tobena, A., et al. "Advantages of Bias and Prejudice: An Exploration of Their Neurocognitive Templates." *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, vol. 23, no. 7, 1999, pp. 1047–58. Crossref, doi:10.1016/s0149-7634(99)00036-6.

⁵ Molenberghs, Pascal. "The Neuroscience of In-Group Bias." *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, vol. 37, no. 8, 2013, pp. 1530–36. Crossref, doi:10.1016/j.neubiorev.2013.06.002.

Success Begins with Self-Confidence and Genuine Interest

Our ability to mitigate the negative effects of our bias and build strong, trusting, collaborative relationships with others – regardless of differences in culture and background – begins with an openness to the process which requires self-confidence and a genuine interest in becoming a better version of ourselves in this regard.

Before we can begin to examine our own cultural and professional backgrounds, it is important to recognize that this kind of self-examination is essentially an exchange of feedback with ourselves, and that accepting feedback – even from ourselves – requires self-confidence.

Research shows a strong correlation between people’s level of self-confidence and both their willingness to accept negative feedback and their performance after receiving it.^{6,7} Without sufficient self-confidence, people often respond to negative feedback with defensiveness in order to justify their actions in an unconscious effort to protect their feelings of self-worth. Alternatively, negative feedback can drain people with low self-confidence of their drive and optimism leaving them unable to perform at their best. Neither of these scenarios is conducive to using feedback for its real purpose which is improvement.

The other essential prerequisite for success is that we be genuinely interested in bettering ourselves when it comes to our interactions with and impact on others. Again, this requires self-examination, this time of our own principles, beliefs and goals for ourselves, our organizations, and our communities.

Together, this genuine interest and sufficient self-confidence (not over confidence) support our ability to receive feedback and to learn, both of which are part of the process of becoming culturally aware and culturally competent.

Mitigating the Effects of Our Bias Requires Both Cultural Awareness and Cultural Competency

Unchecked bias creates issues that can exist at the individual, group, organizational and societal levels, leading to conflict, distrust, perceptions of preferential treatment, dissatisfaction, and much worse. It also results in missed opportunities regarding benefits that can be derived from a diverse and inclusive group of people working together toward shared goals.

“[P]ositive effects of diversity training were greater when training was complemented by other diversity initiatives, targeted to both awareness and skills development, and conducted over a significant period of time.”⁶

To combat the consequences of bias, effective training must include both cultural awareness and the skills involved in achieving cultural competency. A meta-analysis of 40 years of diversity training suggests that the “positive effects of diversity training were greater when training was complemented by other diversity initiatives, targeted to both *awareness* and *skills development*, and conducted over a significant period of time”⁸ Simply enhancing cultural awareness without providing practical techniques for how to reduce bias and its negative effects can actually leave participants feeling powerless, by heightening their sensitivity to expressions of unintentional bias without concrete skills for dealing with or preventing them.⁹

⁶ Folkman, Joseph. “You Can Take It! How to Accept Negative Feedback with Ease.” *Forbes*, 5 Dec. 2017. www.forbes.com/sites/joefolkman/2017/12/05/you-can-take-it-how-to-accept-negative-feedback-with-ease/#500104c723a7.

⁷ Brockner, Joel, et al. “Self-Esteem and Reactions to Negative Feedback: Toward Greater Generalizability.” *Journal of Research in Personality*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1987, pp. 318–33. Crossref, doi:10.1016/0092-6566(87)90014-6.

⁸ Bezrukova, Katerina, et al. “A Meta-Analytical Integration of over 40 Years of Research on Diversity Training Evaluation.” *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 142, no. 11, 2016, pp. 1227–74. Crossref, doi:10.1037/bul0000067.

⁹ Mallett, Robyn, and Margo Monteith. *Confronting Prejudice and Discrimination*. Maarssen-Netherlands, Netherlands, Elsevier Gezondheidszorg, 2019, doi:10.1016/C2017-0-01959-6.

Becoming more culturally aware relates to mindset. It requires the self-examination and exploration of our own personal, cultural, and professional backgrounds and it can increase our sensitivity toward our own biases and their effects on others.

Cultural competency relates to the skills involved, and developing those skills is an ongoing process. Communicating with empathy, managing conflict effectively, and adept change leadership are all important components. Learning practical, time-tested skills such as these enables us to better manage our own perceptions, prevent misunderstandings, build trust and psychological safety, and create stronger relationships. This in turn helps us reduce the negative impact of our bias on others and our organization's effectiveness.

When combined, cultural awareness and the skills involved in cultural competency provide the foundation people need to have the confidence and intention – also known as self-efficacy – to identify and successfully demonstrate behaviors that can help promote and sustain a positive climate for mutual trust, diversity and inclusion within an organization and beyond.¹⁰

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The Bottom Line

Struggling with our own biases is part of what it is to be human. We are not born able to read or write, yet it has become an accepted necessity that we learn to do so because those skills are essential for us to succeed in modern society. The same case can be made for learning cultural awareness and cultural competency in order to contribute to a genuinely inclusive environment that promotes diversity and all of the advantages it offers.

To learn more about how Dale Carnegie Training can help you develop cultural awareness and competency in your people, teams, and organization, contact your local Dale Carnegie office today. Please go to: dalecarnegie.com/office

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¹⁰ Combs, Gwendolyn M., and Fred Luthans. "Diversity Training: Analysis of the Impact of Self-Efficacy." *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2007, pp. 91–120. Crossref, doi:10.1002/hrdq.1193.