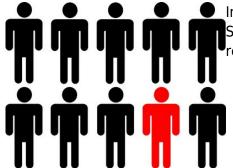


Training on implicit bias has pluses—and pitfalls to avoid



In April, two black men waiting to meet a business associate at a Philadelphia Starbucks were ordered to leave unless they purchased something. When they refused, a manager called the police, who led the men away in handcuffs.

Video of the incident went viral and led to intense scrutiny of the manager's actions. It turns out, police were called just two minutes after the men arrived at the Starbucks, located on Tony Rittenhouse Square. Critics said it was obvious that race had played a role in the reaction.

Public outcry was swift, forcing Starbucks to respond. CEO Howard Schultz called for all 8,000 of the chain's stores to close May 29 for training designed to overcome what many consider the implicit bias that often drives discrimination.

THE LAW Bias plays a part in all discrimination, ranging from race relations to gender and disability stereotypes. Several workplace laws bar employers from discriminating against employees and customers based on protected characteristics.

Most notably, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 bars discrimination against employees or customers based on race, color, religion, national origin or sex. The Age Discrimination in Employment Act protects workers age 40 or older. The ADA requires employers to reasonably accommodate disabled but qualified applicants or employees.

WHAT'S NEW Consensus on the Philadelphia Starbucks incident is that race played a large role. It is hard to imagine white patrons, dressed and behaving the same way the black men were, being hauled away in handcuffs.

The culprit is implicit bias, meaning bias an individual or group holds toward another group based on stereotypes rather than any actual behavior.

In this case, the implicit bias theory works like this: Starbucks employees believed the men weren't going to order anything or weren't telling the truth about waiting to meet someone. That belief was based on their skin color more than any other factor.

Implicit bias training

The implicit bias training planned for Starbucks employees is not the first attempt at this type of training. An earlier effort shows that even successful efforts can be flawed.

In 2013, 60,000 Google employees received what the company called unconscious bias training. It was designed as a response to allegations that the company's workforce was not diverse enough. At the time, the training was heralded as a breakthrough.

However, in 2017, a Google engineer penned an email manifesto claiming the training was tainted by political correctness and the alleged shaming of white men. The manifesto accused Google of creating an "ideological echo chamber." It also attributed the lack of women in tech jobs to biological differences.

HOW TO COMPLY Google's experience shows that training on implicit or unconscious bias training—if poorly implemented—may backfire, leaving the workplace more divided than it was before.

Training only goes so far

Workplace training usually works best when it teaches skills. Results are less assured when training attempts to "correct" attitudes, such as deep-seated bias.

It's certainly worthwhile to make employees aware that they may have hidden biases. On the other hand, telling them they are wrong for viewpoints they may have held since childhood is unlikely to drive meaningful change.

From an employer's standpoint, the fact that employees have biases is not the real issue. We all harbor biases. But employers are only liable when an employee acts on biases when making business decisions such as hiring, firing—or calling the police on customers who have done nothing wrong.

Establishing policies that limit the damage a biased employee can do may be more effective than trying to train away the hate.

Understanding how bias works

Biases are emotional shortcuts that allow people to quickly process conflicting or confusing information. According to Google's training materials on unconscious bias, humans may "receive 11 million bits of information every moment." However, we are capable of consciously processing only 40 bits at a time. The difference is handled by habit and instinct, faculties that are profoundly influenced by biases.

Biased decisions are most often made quickly, either by an individual or a small group of people.

That suggests that by involving larger teams in making decisions, it's possible to combat bias in liability-prone processes such as hiring, promoting or firing.

Another approach: Rely on objective criteria—such as appropriate levels of education or measurable performance standards—that are not subject to biased interpretation.

For the hiring process, limiting the interviewer to a predesigned set of questions can limit the effect of bias.

Review actions

Continually review hiring, promotion and customer service processes to improve them.

Employers that experience a Starbucks moment, in which an action might be attributed to implicit bias, should launch a thorough review of the incident. Determine what caused the problem and commit to making changes that will prevent it from occurring again in the future.