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**Nixon, Rachel A. *Unconscious Bias in Employee Management: Evolving with Emotional Intelligence Development***

**Abstract**

In this paper, there is a comprehensive discussion on unconscious bias that can be experienced in employee management. The elements of company culture are as diverse as the employees who comprise it, with various behavior, emotions, and thought patterns that become the norm for the company. As a company culture develops, conscious and unconscious bias can influence how organizational leaders manage personnel. The primary purpose of this study was to find the best unconscious bias training practices in United States organizations. The current literature on bias training was reviewed and applied to the research conducted in this study. Finally, best unconscious bias training practices are evaluated and comprised into a training outline.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

Company culture is often a way to describe the practices, environment, mission statement, ethics, and values that a company prescribes to. Often the company culture is created by the executive leadership of the company, as well as key contributors and influencers that work in the organization (Black & La Venture, 2015). The elements of a company culture are as diverse as the staff with various behavior, verbiage, and behavior patterns that become standard for the company. While history, rituals, and norms are helpful to new staff as the company grows, other thoughts and habits are passed down as well (Holroyd, Scaife, & Stafford, 2017). Unfortunately, bias may be a habit that is passed down to new employees. Bias that lays dormant in an organization impacts all elements of people management, even when it is unintended and unconscious.

A standard practice for companies to proactively tackle bias is to create policies and standards that all are required to follow. Most organizations include a diversity and anti-harassment policy in their handbook, as well as an emphasis of equality in their company marketing and recruiting. While handbooks are helpful, policies are unable to regulate human conscious or unconscious bias towards other people. Bias towards other people influences hiring, training, promotion, and termination practices and drives inequality and disparity in the workplace (Filut, Kaatz & Carnes, 2017). The problem of inequality and a lack of diversity creates a domino effect where employees are discouraged and disengaged. This creates companies that are plagued with high turnover and unhealthy company cultures (Dipboye, 2016). The consequences of bias go beyond the office doors; companies are finding themselves battling litigation. In 2017, Google was sued with allegations of bias against Asians, political conservatives, and (Mattera, 2019). The case uncovered other potential bias actions and remains

with the courts while the company battles to recover its self-image (Mattera, 2019). The damage of bias also affects the health and morale of employees. Distress, pain and suffering are cited as symptoms in several large civil suit discrimination cases. After distressed employees sued Coca-Cola in 1992, the company was penalized \$192 million as a result of racial bias (Mattera, 2019). While hiring managers, supervisors, and executives have the best intentions towards diversity of thought, gender, social economic status, sexual orientation, heritage, and age, their biased behavior is transferred to the other employees in the organization.

### **Statement of the Problem**

When managers have unchecked bias towards people, conscious or unconscious, their talent management practices perpetuate inequality and discrimination. Bias towards other people influences hiring, training, promotion, and termination practices and drives inequality and disparity in the workplace. The result of hiring and promoting employees that are personally preferred results in an injustice that has permeated our workforce despite historical changes to federal employment law. On an organizational level, conscious and unconscious bias in employee management results in a loss of employee morale, diverse experiences and ideas, and litigation.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to review current literature and research that has determined best practices for identifying and modifying unconscious bias in personnel management and the best practices for training. This study also gathered qualitative data from managers about their experience creating and delivering bias training. After looking at the data from the study, a training program outline was created. Bias in the workforce is well understood and researched, and despite legal employment laws, unconscious bias still negatively impacts

inequality and discrimination. As managers are trained to identify and self-manage their own unconscious bias, this awareness will shift hiring practices.

### **Assumptions of the Study**

It is assumed that some respondents may not understand how to identify what their own biases are and therefore unable to self-report in the study. Prior studies have been conducted on willing participants. It is not possible to clearly measure the capability of employees who show no interest in regulating their personal bias.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The results of this study are limited to the demographics and experiences of the participants of the studies. This research is based off the best practices in only the employees and organizations surveyed, and not a specific industry, education or any other socioeconomic factors that exist.

## **Chapter II: Literature Review**

Many industries and organizations have looked at bias and, despite diligent efforts to develop employee management practices and train employees, it still exists. Although there has been progress regarding the law, practices, and outcomes when it comes to fair and equal treatment of human beings, unconscious bias still creeps into decisions. In professional organizations, unconscious bias influences recruitment, hiring, promotion, and mentoring practices. One of the biggest obstacles for a diverse and dynamic workforce is management's inability to recognize and modify decision-making when its own bias arises. This review looks at the consequences of unconscious bias, current bias training in companies in the United States, the obstacles of effective training, and the best new practices for training employees.

### **Employee Engagement Impact on Training**

Company cultures are often confused with benefits and perks, like paid time off and free coffee. As countries' workforces shift from dedicated 20-year careers at one company to freelancing and frequent job hopping, employers must prioritize talent retention. Organizational culture is the key to progressing into the future and maximizing human potential as employees.

Employee engagement consistently comes back as a number one indicator for whether an employee is going to stay at a company (Sheppard, 2018). Engaged employees are highly motivated and dedicated to doing the best work at the company, as well as enthusiastic and satisfied about their workplace. The correlation between healthy people-centric company cultures and employee engagement point to what organizations need to be doing in order to care for their talent (Guillaume, Dawson, Otaye-Ebede, Woods, & West, 2017). Now, as companies want to be an employer of choice, they must adapt to find ways to attract, develop, and retain their talent. The human resource departments have adjusted to this trend and are now a key part

of strategic talent acquisitions planning (Sheppard, 2018). With the insight that human resources and operations professionals bring, there are new theories and methods being created to value people as the company's best asset (Black & LaVenture, 2015). Human resources must be part of the decision-making since other department heads may not be as well versed in the sociological and psychological motivations of people. Netflix, for example, took the lead on this in 2001, discovering that no amount of lunch basketball games or free sushi could compare to the benefits of hiring top talent for teams to work side by side (McCormick, 2015). Not only did Netflix weed out subpar talent, they changed their talent acquisition strategy to include diversity and bias training. Essentially, Netflix found employees who had high potential to be engaged, and then delivered on their commitment to developing and properly training them (McCormick, 2015).

In order to train employees properly, an organizational culture needs to have trust (Black & LaVenture, 2015). This trust be in the mission and core values of the company, confidence in the leadership, and an expectation of open and honest communication. While it is common to say that people do not leave companies, they leave managers, it is more complex than that (Cundiff, Danube, Zawadzki, & Shields, (2018). Managers should have an opportunity for development as they rise through the ranks, and they should also be able to see an impeccable example from the top, or the employees lose trust in the executive team (Cundiff et al., 2018). When there is trust in the top management, there is an environment of effective safety in leadership at all levels (Black & LaVenture, 2015). Essentially, executive team leadership is what invents and drives the company culture, good or bad (Cooper, 2015). When employees do not have confidence in the executive team, not only negatively impacts employee engagement, but it severely hinders successful training goals and objectives (Cooper, 2015).

Another key element in addressing employee engagement as a key piece of bias training is investing and valuing their human capital. The obstacle of becoming and remaining an employer of choice is not just a public relations problem (Mahoney & Kor, 2015). Becoming an employer of trust starts with how people are treated (Mahoney & Kor, 2015). A company culture must go beyond saying they value employees to demonstrating how they are valued. Development and training are one-way companies can take care of their human capital and create a culture of inclusivity (Ashkanasy, Zerbe & Hartel, 2016). While companies do not have the responsibility of employee self-actualization, contributing and facilitating an environment of human respect treats the underlining cause of implicit bias (Ashkanasy et al., 2016).

A high-performance organizational culture will also ensure that the employees have meaningful work that motivates them to give exceptional service (Rao, 2017). As a part of meaningful work, employees will have a hand in creating the standards and processes and, therefore, the company culture (Rao, 2017). Employees with meaningful work strive for growth, embrace new challenges, and take full ownership of their work (Gündemir, Homan, Usova, & Galinsky, 2017). A culture that allows employee autonomy and embraces individuality sends the message that they are valued. Valued employees are loyal brand ambassadors and recruiters and are consistently seeking high standards (Gündemir et al., 2017). As the organization navigates the ebb and flow of obstacles and success, engaged employees are onboard for the long haul and show pride in accomplishing tough times together (Black & LaVenture, 2015). The relationship between management and employee creates a symbiotic and reliable system where one helps the other succeed. A company culture is inviting and inclusive to diversity of thought, knowing that this creates exceptional shared work and ensures a prosperous future (Rao, 2017).

## **Bias in United States' Organizations**

Companies are making efforts to bring diversity to their organizations by conducting training seminars and setting strategic long-term goals (Sheppard, 2018). There remains a lack of gender and racial equality in key roles in organizations, as well as pay disparity among people in different socio-economic status (Filut, Kaatz, & Carnes, 2017). The race and gender intersections in employee management practices mirror the inequality in American culture (Browne & Misra, 2003). While many people have learned to embrace and support other people different from them, underlying society norms still influence decision-making. Executives now implement policies that prohibit harassment, including making decisions based off their opinion of others' gender, race, age, sexual preferences, disability, and country of origin (Jones, Arena, Nittrouer, Alonso, & Lindsey, 2017). Now more than ever, human resource departments are conducting training on diversity and anti-harassment (Jones et al., 2017). What remains is the issue of unconscious bias in management.

Unconscious bias in employee management creates a ripple effect throughout the organizational culture that becomes difficult to untangle (Murray, 2016). For instance, as companies grow, one unconscious bias that is dominant in teams is the "hire like me" bias (Emerson, 2017). With change and the addition of a new person, people want to ensure they will like who their new desk mate will be. Even when teams are thoroughly trained in diversity and harassment policies and hold no ill will towards people different from them, unconscious bias will naturally filter into their decision-making process (Wilkie, 2014).

## **Science Behind Unconscious Bias**

The complication with attempting to repress all bias in humans is that it is not just imbedded in our behavior and decision-making. Scientist have speculated that over 75% of our

thought function is unconscious (Greenberg, 2015). When humans are shown images of people they were unconsciously biased against, scientists noted that their amygdala became activated (Greenberg, 2015). Since the amygdala is the part of our brain that controls the messages of emotional responses, assessment of threat, reason, and response, it dictates how we respond to elements in the physical environment (Ghoshal, Lippard, Ribas & Muir, 2013). It can be argued that unconscious bias developed naturally in human brains out of survival and is therefore necessary today. The dilemma with this assumption is that our society has progressed to a level where this neurological response no longer serves us and can instigate the delivery of inaccurate information (Ghoshal et al., 2013). Greenberg (2015) found that, “Implicit biases are particularly difficult to identify, because an individual’s unconscious bias is often at odds with that person’s unconscious bias stated beliefs and values” (p. 80).

### **Emotional Intelligence and Bias**

Emotional intelligence (EI) is a term that started being used in scientific communities in 1990 (Zeidner, Matthews, & Roberts, 2004). Although the concept of emotional intelligence is defined differently by people, “perhaps the mostly widely accepted scientific definition of EI is the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use the information to guide one’s thinking and actions” (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p.189). As scientific communities have published data, organizations across the United States have looked at how EI affects employees in the workplace (Lievens & Chan, 2017).

High emotional intelligence is quickly becoming a skill that hiring managers are looking for, and executive positions are requiring (Lievens & Chan, 2017). Although developed emotional intelligence is sought after, the need for employees to be emotionally intuitive, perceptive, and empathetic conflicts with the rigid and cold perception of corporations

(Ashkanasy et al., 2016). Given the differences between employees mental, emotional, physical, and ethnic backgrounds, emotional intelligence varies widely (Zeidner et al., 2004). Therefore, the expectation that employees come to work with well developed emotional intelligence and the ability to self-monitor unconscious bias may be unrealistic (Radcliffe, 2011).

Even when a person is aware of their own bias, it has not been shown to significantly change behaviors in managers (Noon, 2018). Noon (2018) asserted that awareness training is generally based on exaggerated assumptions about bias, arguing, “The unconscious bias narrative generally takes the form of an assertion that almost everyone is a suppressed racist” (p. 200). Further, training employees to just be aware of their biases removes blame from an individual by labeling it as unconscious (McGregor, 2016). This means that the individual feels they have less responsibility to stop discrimination because they have no control over having biases (McGregor, 2016). Both managers and employees in the workplace must be aware of the responsibility they have toward discrimination in order to change their behavior for the better (Jones et al., 2017). Holroyd (2017) drew the same conclusion in that individuals in companies must address the responsibility they have for their own discrimination and fix them rather than intend on the organization to remedy the problem.

McGregor (2016) asserted that bringing awareness of discrimination without teaching personal responsibility also causes negative outcomes in companies. For instance, managers dislike being told who to hire, so even a manager is aware of bias, he or she still may not hire a minority.

### **Manager Bias**

There are multiple ways unconscious bias influences how managers supervise their employees. Unconscious or conscious bias may start in the recruiting process, bias towards

names, areas of the city a candidate lives in, education levels and where they were schooled, hobbies, and physical appearance, to name a few, influence who is chosen to receive job offers (Noon, 2017). Managers may be unaware that they hold prejudice, judgement or bias against individuals who they supervise, and it can affect how they manage that employee both negatively and positively (Murray, 2016). Dykstra (2018), listed examples of researched manager biases:

- Like me bias: Preference, hiring, and promotion employees like ourselves.
- Halo or Horns Effect: Allowing one area to of strength or weakness be the deciding factor in performance evaluation.
- Contrast bias: Comparing employees' performance against each other and not a company standard.
- Personal Biases: Employees are reviewed on their performance purely by who the manager likes or dislikes.

Often, this kind of bias invades a manager's decision-making discourse by directing the evaluation of candidates or an individual's performance based on their perceived likelihood of either improving team success or simply replicating the status quo (Noon, 2017). Ideally, there is need for a fundamental shift in the way managers may allow unconscious bias to influence personnel management decisions (Dykstra, 2018).

The effects of unconscious bias in organizations has a long-term impact on the company's culture as it becomes woven into the norms and behaviors of the employees. Bias towards attractiveness in other people is rooted in our need to mate early in evolution, which would then secure financial and social resources (Maestriperieri, Henry, & Nickels, 2017). Left unchecked, unconscious bias will continue to drive income disparity among minority groups and to perpetuate gender and racial stereotypes (Maestriperieri et al., 2017).

## **Current Company Solutions**

Global research studies on organizations have shown that the number one impact on retaining top talent is employee engagement (Aon, 2018). While there are numerous strategies on how to successfully engage employees, one area that should be addressed is the negative impact on employee morale, particularly through lack of diversity and equality. (Gammie, 2018) found that a positive impact on employee morale when executive leaders placed high value on ensuring there was a climate of equality and encouraging employees to show mutual respect. Bias in employee management habits, whether conscious or not, cripples the climate of equality that some leaders have worked so hard to cultivate (Gammie, 2018).

Organization leaders may be aware that unconscious bias exists, and yet there are not clear solutions to eliminate unconscious bias in recruiting, hiring, promotion and mentoring of employees. Fortune 500 companies have started changing their approach to handle bias and discrimination complaints (Manjoo, 2014). Google started a mandatory unconscious bias training program in 2013, aimed at trying to make employees aware of hidden bias (Manjoo, 2014). Starbucks corporation closed over 8,000 stores across the U.S. for a racial bias training program on May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019 after an incident involving client discrimination (Calfas, 2018). Cosmetic company Sephora shutdown stores for an hour to hold an inclusivity workshop for 16,000 employees in effort to mitigate the damage from a racial profiling incident in their Calabasa, California retail store (Bromwich, 2019). There has be wide speculation about the success of the training programs, but no clarifying data has been published.

Some companies are attempting to tackle the effects of unconscious bias by sending their leaders to diversity and inclusion training (Noon, 2018). The diversity aspect of the training teams speaks to the importance to having differences in thoughts, behavior, demographics etc.

which can help to mitigate the effects of bias (Emerson, 2017). Leadership training also includes content that gives insight into actual workplace situations, and past solutions (Emerson, 2017). As one part of the training, managers are taught to embrace employee difference by creating an environment of inclusivity and a sense of belonging (McGregor, 2018). Organizational leaders are also encouraged to learn to identify their biases and learn ways to overcome them one by one, although the idea that a human can rid themselves completely of bias is unproven (Payne, Niemi, & Doris, 2018).

Since companies have found that implicit bias can influence recruiting and hiring practices, organizations are working on changing how candidates are evaluated (Sekaquaptewa, Takahashi, Malley, Herzog, & Bliss, 2019). Hiring practices and processes are adapting to include diverse hiring techniques, like receiving blind resumes where demographic, education, and social status indicators are removed (Cundiff et al., 2018). Another tactic to reduce potential bias, is to have clear cut key performance indicators and quantifiable measures of success (Kaplan, Peterson, & Samuels, 2018).

### **Best Unconscious Bias Training Practices**

The next step in shaping change in how managers evolve from decision-making based off unconscious bias is first de-stigmatizing the shame associated with having judgements, preference, and favoritisms as humans (Noon, 2017). Often, this kind of bias invades a manager's decision-making discourse by directing the evaluation of candidates or an individual's performance based on their perceived likelihood of either improving team success or simply replicating the status quo (Noon, 2017). Ideally, there is need for a fundamental shift in the way people let their personal bias influence certain decision.

The solutions for employees understanding and monitoring their own unconscious bias, include the provision of incentives, as well as encouraging employee participation in seminars and training. Some of the training content has been geared toward learning to identify unconscious bias as it occurs (Lievens & Chan, 2017). What has not worked, however, is expecting swift and long last results with one company wide training session (Noon, 2017). Since unconscious bias accumulates and develops based on an individual's life experiences, it appears exceptionally difficult to eliminate completely through one day of company training (Ghoshal et al., 2013).

One common practice is hiring based off culture fit. This reliance on whether a candidate would fit the company is a problematic construct in most organizations (Jones et al., 2017). Without creating measurable and objective standards for qualifying a culture fit, underlying biases tend to guide the decision making (Jones et al., 2017) In order to address the effects of unconscious bias in the organization, norms, behavior, and company practices need to be acknowledged and addressed on the corporate and executive level (Black & LaVenture, 2015).

Thus, it is imperative for all employee who are developing and delivering training programs to have the support of the management team. Black (2015) stated that upper management must make employees their priority when it comes to company culture and bias training. In addition, McGregor (2018) noted that employees were more likely to attend voluntary training when company leaders also attended the training.

Harvard University has online implicit bias tests that question participants about underlying beliefs or stereotypes (Harvard, 2011). The implicit-association tests (IAT) allow participants to become aware of unconscious stereotypes they may hold towards others race, gender, socio economic status, physical appearance, age, and religion (Harvard, 2019). Using

the results, Greenberg (2015) concluded that researchers can then “assess the correlation between an employee’s implicit bias and an employer’s adverse employment decisions” (p.83), by looking at how the bias data overlap personnel management practices.

There are ways that IAT tests can be used to educate participants on unconscious bias and increase awareness of its prevalence, but the data does not suggest that it will help people get rid of unconscious bias (Greenberg, 2015). Some test takers have reported adverse reactions to the results, largely because the revelation about themselves is unsettling or they feel shame (Jackson, 2018). Payne, Niemi, and Doris (2018) reported, that there is controversy regarding the validity of AIT bias tests, largely since the data is, “useful for predicting how groups will respond on average, not forecasting how particular individuals will behave” (para. 6.).

Unconscious bias training programs are now being expanded to include diversity and inclusion as a part the curriculum (Ghoshal et al., 2013). Emerson (2017) said the goal is to inform all employees, but specifically those responsible for personnel management, about the important of have a wide spectrum of differences. Not only is a diverse team part of a health company culture, but also helps to reduce bias by having different ideas, skills, and opinion (Emerson, 2017).

No matter what kind of learning is being done or who is learning, all unconscious bias training must have clear learning objectives and measurable outcomes. Atewologun, Cornish and Tresh (2018) argued that it is difficult to suggest outcomes based on bias training alone. Self-report measures, for instance, cannot tell researchers if behaviors changed because of training or other reasons. The consistent challenge with measuring success in soft skills training, therefore, is the way to correctly measure the effects of training (Mahoney & Kor, 2015). One way is to “randomly assign matched participants to intervention and control groups to evaluate

the effectiveness of the training” (Atewologun et al., 2018, p. 19). In many instances, training goals and objectives is needed to properly assess the effectiveness of the training programs.

There have been different perspectives about the return on investment of bias training. It is argued that training is a helpful part of a long-term diversity and inclusion strategy, but the content must well design and received (Emerson, 2017). The training is not a solution to the problem but rather a step that must go hand in hand with consistent evaluation and innovation (Emerson, 2017).

As artificial intelligence continues to advance in capabilities, many executives are also looking to human resources information systems (HRIS) to regulate and solve the problems with bias, and employee performance evaluations (Sheppard, 2018). The technology designed for an HRIS system is created to process large amounts of recruitment, hiring, and performance review data for employees. However, even the most recent software solutions cause more harm than good (Sheppard, 2018). According to Johansson and Herranen (2019), traditional recruitment is a tested process and has the benefit of human interaction. AI in hiring, on the other hand, helps with hiring by scanning a text and gathering information. While AI may speed up the hiring process, one concern is about how the management program is written (Johansson & Herranen, 2019). In 2015, Amazon found that the AI engine showed bias against women and favored men for software development (Sheppard, 2018). Although AI technology can bypass bias that comes from someone’s name, gender, and age, it does not solve the problem of discrimination and bias in the workplace (Johansson & Herranen, 2019). All technology is still created by humans, and therefore has susceptibility to the influence of unconscious bias; essential, the bias is written into the code. The experts writing the software need to have the must be trained on

how to self-monitor their own bias to avoid unconscious bias being written into the software (Johansson & Herranen, 2019).

### **Summary**

Unconscious bias solutions are being looked at throughout many industries and organizations, and despite diligent efforts to train and affect employee management practices, it remains. Organizations now have multiple new opportunities and alternative training methods to address unconscious bias in employee management. By using technology properly, engaging employees, securing executive training support, and developing emotional intelligence in all employees, unconscious bias in employee management can be reduced.

### **Chapter III: Methodology**

Managers and supervisors have the responsibility of evaluating employees during the performance reviews process. Unconscious bias from a manager can impact how an employee is evaluated, influencing whether they will receive a raise, bonus, or future promotion. Current company training is not mitigating the underlining discrimination and stereotyping that occurs in performance reviews, as it continues to occur in the United States workforce. By gathering experiences from human resource management, the new, best practices in unconscious bias training have been uncovered.

#### **Subject Selection and Description**

Criteria for participation in this research included the following: an employee currently holding a manager or supervisor position, five to eight years in the human resources industry, currently working in the United States, and regularly performs employee management tasks 50% of their workday. An additional qualification for participants was that they directly participate in the creation, delivery, and evaluation of bias training programs. Volunteers who met all required qualifications for this study were selected to participate in the order in which they replied to the advertisement. Participation in this small qualitative study was voluntary, and personal identifiers were kept confidential.

#### **Instrumentation**

A qualitative interview was used to collect information about the manager's experience and understanding of unconscious bias as it relates to evaluating performance in their subordinates. Participants were also asked about what needs to be implemented or changed in unconscious bias training for it to be effective. The interview questions (see Appendix A) are a

set of 11 questions that were designed to locate the gaps of understanding unconscious bias in supervisors and managers and what new knowledge and skills are needed for training.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

In order to gather willing participants, freelance websites and the professional networking website, LinkedIn.com, were used to recruit the participants. The specifics and the qualifying criteria were advertised on both online platforms requesting volunteers. All ten participants were recruited online anonymously with limited personal information shared with the researcher to mitigate conscious or unconscious bias. Once selected, participants were provided with consent forms that explained the purpose of the study, benefits and risks of participating, and their authorization to use their answers in the study. Participants were also made aware that there was minimal risk to them for sharing their experience, but there may be time when they could feel uncomfortable. Participants were sent the list of interview questions ahead of time and then asked to share their experience with bias training programs and content centered around their opinions and personal preference. The qualitative data was then collected and organized for analysis. In order to ensure participant privacy, consent forms were completed and stored along with the transcripts in a secured and private computer location.

### **Data Analysis**

All data collection and analysis were conducted by the researcher. After the data was collected, the scripts were then analyzed for data themes, overlaps, and key points. The themes from the data were incorporated into the training module as the deliverable.

### **Limitations**

The constraints of this research lied in the number of participants and data that needed to be completed in order to get a proper sample size of the mid-level managers in the human

resources field working in the United States. Time was also a limitation, as an in-depth study of unconscious bias in performance management in the United States would take extensive time to complete. The experiences shared by all participants are subject to their own perspective, past experiences, and bias, making isolating identifying personal unconscious bias a near impossibility. The study relied on the honest opinions and experience of the participants, limiting the validity to the data.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to review current literature and research that has determined best practices for identifying and modifying unconscious bias in personnel management and the best practices for training.

## **Chapter IV: Results**

This research was conducted to gather information on the experiences of human resources leaders regarding the creation, delivery, participation, and evaluation of unconscious bias training. In order to gather current and relative data, the 10 interview participants were all located in the United States, currently holding a manager or supervisor position, five to eight years in the human resources industry, and regularly performed employee management tasks 50% of their workday. The 10 research participants consisted of seven women and three men, between the ages of 32 to 65 years old. Using the qualitative research and current literature on unconscious bias training practice, this study used the information to create a recommended training outline.

### **Data Analysis**

Interview questions (Appendix A) were prepared and used during each one-on-one interview. All participants were asked the same questions and each respondent was asked to elaborate to their level of comfort. As each participant answered each question, some shared more information than just the topics of the questions provided. The following sections present the respondents answers in the order the questions were asked.

### **Experience with Bias in the Workplace**

Participants were asked: “What has been your experience with bias in the workplace”? All 10 respondents reported being affected by conscious or unconscious bias in their workplace, whether it happened to them or they witnessed it. There were several issues the HR leaders self-reported in this study that matched the current research in the literature about unconscious and conscious bias in recruiting, performance management, promotions, and interpersonal relationships that occurs despite employees attending training (McGregor, 2016). One

respondent shared that “there are frequent cases at my company where leaders want to terminate employees citing a lack of ‘culture fit’ without any supporting performance documentation.”

Another respondent shared that they were asked to not hire any more people in a specific racial group, indicating that at his company the line between bias and discrimination were blurred. One respondent shared the experience that, “The culture amongst many of the employees was that it was OK to treat Jewish employees negatively, especially if they had a strong Israeli connection.” A theme of these comments indicates that when unconscious bias is not understood by employees or leaders, discrimination can be perceived as a preference and not an illegal employment practice.

In another example, five respondents said recruiting was where they see the most unconscious bias. Biases such as where the candidates went to college, gender preferences for specific roles i.e. only females answer phones, preference towards go getters and attractive people were a few of the examples given. Another participant shared that even though she works to monitor her own judgements or biases, as other hiring managers enter the process, unconscious bias starts to effect hiring decisions.

### **Monitoring Unconscious Bias**

The participants were asked, how have you worked to monitor your own unconscious bias? Each respondent listed ways they monitor their own bias as human resource professionals and personnel managers:

- Taking time to reflect on motives
- Stopping and consider all information/facts
- Writing detailed interview notes
- Asking other HR partners for feedback

- Requesting “blind resumes” or resumes without candidate demographics
- Checking in and monitoring thoughts
- Formulating positive thoughts about other people
- Participating in mindful activities/exercises
- Addressing bias to coworkers in an open and honest way
- Monitoring preferences or dislike for specific employees
- Enforcing workplace boundaries between co-worker and friend
- Refraining from gossiping about employees or peers
- Assuring confidentiality in employee matters

Four of the respondents spoke specifically about recruiting activities, where they keep detailed interview notes, seek peer feedback, and take time to personally reflect. Another participant reported that establishing firm work boundaries and avoiding getting too personal with employees outside of the office helped him to monitor by not creating preference for specific employees. All respondents shared methods they use to regulate how their bias effects business decisions. One of the participants shared this experience saying,

I know that sometimes I make judgments based on one’s physical image. While I believe there is value in reviewing someone’s LinkedIn and/or other social media accounts prior to meeting them at a conference or networking event, I do so with purpose and try to catch myself if I’m spending too much time on a photo.

Using critical thinking and emotional intelligence, respondents were better able to be personally aware, reporting that it made a positive difference.

### **How Can Unconscious Bias be Eliminated in Performance Management?**

Participants were asked: “What do you believe the solutions are to fixing unconscious bias in performance management?” Partnering with human resources, consistency in policies, diverse hiring teams, ongoing training, and executive support were listed as solutions to curb bias influence in the performance management process. One respondent shared her opinion saying,

I find it beneficial to ensure that leaders are vetting performance management suggestions and recommendations through a business partner. In this model, leaders “spread the risk”, by explaining their reasons, and open themselves up for feedback on the level of objectivity they are utilizing as it relates to performance management.

This research validated the findings by Black and La Venture (2015), that executive team support, manager by in, and HR partnership is crucial to a healthy company culture (Black & LaVenture, 2015). Another manager stressed the importance of taking steps before the performance management process starts, saying, “it is important to have experienced, well-trained managers who are piloting this (performance review) experience.” Along with capable and mentored first line managers, consistency was a word used by six of the respondents. The participants indicated that consistency in processes, communication, documentation and policies helps mitigate bias since all employees would go through the same process.

### **Experience Participating in Unconscious Bias Training**

Participants were asked: “When participating in unconscious bias training, what was your experience?” Respondents observed that employees did not care about training, and that it made no impact in changing how unconscious bias affects business decisions. One HR leader shared this, “If the group has a lot of meaty questions/examples and is willing to be vulnerable, I’ve found the training to be excellent. If the group is less open and/or the facilitator isn’t as skilled,

the training can be too high level and not that impactful.” One respondent described unconscious bias training as “horrendous” and “very off putting.” Three respondents reported that during bias training the message was distorted, and misunderstood, largely because the employees felt defensive and attacked for having bias. During the one interview, the respondent said, “It’s especially difficult when dealing with the concept of unconscious bias, since the first reaction of those around me was, I’m not a racist. Making everyone feel guilty was counterproductive to the training in general.” Research conducted by Noon (2018) correlated to the data found in this study, that informing employees of their unconscious bias had no effect in changing behavior and decision making (Noon, 2018). The overarching theme of the need for emotional intelligence development for all employee appeared at this point in this data as well. Specifically, the data showed that when leaders were willing to be vulnerable and share their experiences, the training was reported as more effective.

### **Experience Conducting Unconscious Bias Training**

Participants were asked: “When conducting unconscious bias training, what was your experience?” Three participants stated that creating and leading the training helped them again to self-regulate and monitor their own bias. Another respondent observed that her own willingness to be open and share personal experiences of bias opened a dialogue where trainees share as well. All respondents shared that they thought about how they could include employees in a dialogue about bias and be willing to share their own experiences. One respondent said, “My experience was that getting the participants to be active and engaged in group activities and conversations helped individuals better understand their own unconscious bias.” Another participant talked about experiences she had saying, “Sometimes you’ve got a great mix of participants who want to share, have great examples, lots of questions and it just flows. Other

times, it just doesn't. I always found it was best to co-train the sessions with two people who represented at least two different groups, however you want to define those." The data showed that when employees were willing to be vulnerable and share their experiences, the training was reported as more effective.

### **Experience Conducting Successful Bias Training**

Participants were asked: "What made your training successful?" Openness to having discussions and answering employees' questions was the most important indicator of success reported in this study. It was said to be successful when executives shared stories of their own unconscious bias and how it has impacted them in the workplace. The significant impact of strong leadership, executive support and examples. surfaced as a theme. As it pertains to this interview question, participants who reported successful training, also said the senior leadership fully backed their training program. One HR leader listed several keys to success, saying, "I found it helpful to have two trainers, senior leadership support, robust exercises to see powerful examples, and employees who are willing to share their stories." The data also showed that the bias training was reported as more successful when the trainer themselves used emotional intelligence to read the room and guide the people in the difficult discussion.

### **How Can Unconscious Bias Training be Improved?**

Participants were asked: "What would you like to see change in unconscious bias training? One respondent reiterated the need for open ended questions, also adding, "Feedback and conversation about what is going on to assure that everyone understands what is being taught, there are some trainees that don't understand but they will not tell you." At this point in the research another theme developed, by looking at the communication barriers in the delivery on bias training content. The data showed that when employees were confused by the topic of

unconscious bias, or felt shamed by having their own bias, the training was reported as unsuccessful. A respondent suggested this change in bias training,

I'd like to see less white guilt and more conversations about communities and how our upbringings and current circumstances shape who we are and what we believe. Part of promoting diversity within an organization is the ability to have these conversations and own who we are, while still appreciating the differences of others.

Two respondents also said they would like to see trainees learn how to navigate their own bias through learning how to reflect and self-monitor, rather than just trained to be aware. The same participants wanted to place additional focus on training employees how to self-manage unconscious bias and include tips on how to reflect on day to day activities.

### **Misconceptions About Unconscious Bias**

The participants were asked: "What do you think are some of the misconceptions about unconscious bias? All 10 participants indicated that the biggest misunderstanding when it came to bias training, was that unconscious bias was controllable. A participant described his experience saying,

The biggest misconceptions about unconscious bias is that biases are always obvious, such as skin color, or age, or that only some people are affected by bias. Additionally, I feel that a misconception that causes participants to hesitate in being honest with themselves and hesitant to participate in group/class discussion is that unconscious bias is aligned with such things as racism, ageism, etc.

Another participant had a similar opinion sharing, "I think that the first reaction of many who learn about unconscious bias is that it's always a bad thing. It's not necessarily; it's just a manifestation of who you are on the inside." Another frustration expressed by the research

participants was when they participated in bias and diversity training, there was no follow up and often long gaps between training. The theme of support showed again in the data here, this time in reference to the continued needs assessment and evaluation post training.

### **Experiences Post Unconscious Bias Training**

The participants were asked: “What has not been successful post unconscious bias training?” The leaders reported that once training was over, employees were left with few resources. One respondent said, “It was a one-time training, leaving the participants to self-manage after the class. The course did not provide recommendations on how to self-manage and /or reflect.” The lack of follow up post training was listed by the respondents as one of the biggest barriers they saw in employees changing their behavior towards unconscious bias training. Other barriers reported were not, as well as managers not understanding the importance of training. Again, executive leadership support was reported as an imperative part to training. One respondent said, “It’s not enough to tell people it’s important, the example from the leadership is what really sets the tone. When leaders attending the training, are vocal about expectations, and live to those expectations, the employees will take notice.” The respondents also gave some suggestions of support needed from the executive team to have unconscious bias training that is successful:

- Training Budgets
- Time to deliver training
- Supportive leadership messaging
- Holding their teams accountable
- Role modeling behavior
- Attending all training

- Leading the training if needed
- Challenging each other to be accountable

### **Barriers to Employee Behavior Changes**

Participants were asked: “What do you see as the biggest barrier to employees changing their behavior around bias training?” Seven of the research participants said that the largest barrier was sticking with the training and following up. One of the seven described it this way, “There are so many priorities in the workplace and while I think most employees attend this training with positive intentions, they are quickly off to the next thing.” Another participant stressed the need for personal stories and examples in the training, because it was those experiences that they felt made the most impact to leaving a lasting impression after training. Along with follow up post training, leadership example was also listed as a necessary step to overcoming barriers that effect employees changing their behavior. One barrier mentioned by a respondent is helping employees and managers see that bias training is useful, and not another mandatory training.

### **How Technology Impacts Bias**

The participants were asked: “How has technology affected bias at your organization?” The HR leaders said that the use of applicant tracking systems can be helpful, particularly with analytics and hiring metrics. While process improvements and communication were reported as being improved with the use of technology, there were also negative responses to how technology affects bias specifically. One respondent described it saying, “We’ve transitioned to conducting many of our phone screens as video conferences instead. With a video conference, there is more opportunity for affective heuristic and nonverbal bias than with a phone screen.” Another downside reported was applicant tracking systems settings that may filter out candidates

that are qualified, but the hiring manager never sees the resume. An example of this occurring is described here,

We've been careful when looking at the utilization of our Applicant Tracking System to ensure that we're not unfairly screening out those with characteristics normally associated with certain ethnic groups. One place where there may be an issue is our requirement for a clean background. Studies have shown that this may unintentionally have a disparate impact on those of color.

One respondent expressed frustration when questioned about how technology helps or hurts bias training. This participant said that technology use at their company fuels disparity and the effects of unconscious bias in their office. Due to the multiple generations of employees in their office, groups made inaccurate assumptions of each other; whether millennials knew how to have face to face conversations, or if baby boomers knew how to use the computer. None of the study participants listed technology as a viable solution to curbing unconscious bias.

The themes that emerged from this qualitative study validate the need for improved unconscious bias training practices, and the ways each improvement would support and build on the other. The data showed that executive leadership and manager buy in was critical to employees taking the bias training seriously. The data also showed that when leaders were willing to be open, honest, and vulnerable about their personal experiences with bias, employees joined the conversation and listened. This study further confirmed the need for all employees to be guided and trained in emotional intelligence skills, and how those skills can help them be responsible and self-regulate their bias.

## Summary

The responses in the interviews with the human resource leaders confirmed that unconscious bias training may need improvement to be fully effective in organizations. Several themes developed in the data analysis, regarding bias training practices. The first theme formulated from this data set was the need for additional training than just bias alone. Emotional intelligence needs to be taught and developed before employees can be trained to understand how to self-regulate personal bias. The data showed that when leaders were willing to be vulnerable and share their experiences, the training was reported as more effective. The data also showed that when the trainer themselves used emotional intelligence to read the room and guide the people in the difficult discussion, the training was reported as more impactful. The second theme from the interviews showed that when employees participate in unconscious bias training, miscommunication, labeling, and shaming creates a learning barrier for trainees. The data showed that when employees were confused by the topic of unconscious bias, or felt shamed by having their own bias, the training was reported as unsuccessful. The third theme highlighted in this study was that unconscious bias must be clearly taught through management behavior and support that continues between unconscious bias training sessions.

## **Chapter V: Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendation**

Current literature and this study give evidence to the problem that unchecked bias, whether implicit or not, remains an obstacle in United States organizations, despite training on the subject (Dipboye, 2016). Executive teams are looking for ways to create a company culture where people want to work, and there is an atmosphere of diversity and inclusion. In looking at the ways bias training has not worked in the past, this study offered new insight and solutions to improved training.

### **Discussion**

Employees need to be given the best support, resources, and autonomy in order to learn the skills needed to self-monitor bias. The environment where employees develop their emotional intelligence needs to be encouraging of health and wellness outside of a person's return on investment. The leadership in the organization needs to be back training programs through verbal cues, as well as through modeling the standard of behavior at the company. The training needs to be expanded to include the teaching employees how to be mindful and build their emotional intelligence. And finally, in order to continue guiding and supporting employees, there needs to be in-depth training evaluation to address training obstacles and ongoing support to remain vigilant of how bias effects the company culture.

As this research showed, bias training alone does not provide the strategies to help employees self-regulate unconscious bias. The problem of personnel management decisions being influenced by bias is made worse when employees feel labeled as deviant to the society norm (McCormick, 2015). This study further confirms that the environment in which an employee is training is influenced by their ability to retain the information. The training environment needs to be supportive and inclusive, without shaming or labeling people for biases

they may not be aware of. Included in the training is clear goals and objectives, where measurements for success show the training program and employee progress. The environment of inclusion needs to carry past the training room, to a company culture where all employees are motivated to self-monitor their bias.

In looking at the concepts that overlap in both this study and the literature review, executive support and manager buy-in remains critical to whether employees are even open to training. When the leadership team allows themselves to be vulnerable and share their experiences, employees are more likely to emulate the behavior (Murry, 2016). This research also overlapped with the current studies on unconscious bias, that stated that executives' behavior directly affects the health of the company culture, and how the employees respond in turn (Black & LaVenture, 2016). The current literature suggests that as executives and managers can learn to self-monitor their own bias as it arises, employees will have a better opportunity to emulate the example.

This research also gave insight into the benefit of partnering with HR leaders when it comes to talent acquisition strategy, diversity, inclusion, and bias training, as well as clear training goals and objectives that are measurable. Conducting pre and post training data can show leaders what specifically about the training environment, content, and learning strategies will enable the trainees to fully learn (Ashkanasy, 2016).

## **Conclusions**

Bias, conscious or unconscious, can affect the decisions employees make at all levels of an organization. The literature showed that prior training and strict policies were not effective in ridding employees of bias. The scientific evidence shows that in fact, humans are not capable of suppressing unconscious bias, as it is built into humans' survival mechanisms.

This research showed how unconscious and conscious bias needs to be understood, by all members of the workforce. What it is, what it looks like, why it happens, and the ways we can be mindful of our own bias as it arises. The participants in this study listed ways they have learned to monitor their unconscious bias to the best of their ability. The skills listed in the study have the potential to effectively be taught to other employees. Using critical thinking and emotional intelligence, respondents were better able to be personally aware, reporting that it made a positive difference. This study offered solutions for unconscious bias training to improve in companies by partnering with HR, having executive support and manager buy in, offering ongoing resources to employees and having consistency in consistency in processes, communication, documentation and policies.

The overarching theme of the need for emotional intelligence development for all employees and the data showed that when leaders were able to exemplify it through their behavior and be willing to be vulnerable and share their experiences, the training was reported as more effective. The data also showed that the bias training was reported as more successful when the trainer themselves used emotional intelligence, sought feedback from other HR leaders, and, successfully navigating difficult conversations with employees.

This research was limited to the number of respondents recruited to participate. Conducting the interviews with a larger sample and would be beneficial. A survey could be developed to determine the effectiveness of unconscious bias training. Given the complexity and layers to the topic of bias, it would also be prudent to look at best training practices in different industries, cities, population size, and demographics

## Recommendations

Emotional intelligence development in employees needs to be used as the corner stone to any training in the company, specifically bias training. It must be taught, encouraged, supported, modeled and guided, and then employees are able to self-monitor. These employees become the next line managers, and the cycle of learning needs to continue. Bias training also needs to fit within the larger context of the organization's diversity and inclusion program; as opposed to just a part of compliance. Based off this study and current literature on the best practices in unconscious bias training, a detailed training outline was created. (Appendix B). While it ultimately up to the individual employee to learn to identify and self-monitor their bias influenced decisions, organizations can start shifting the allocation of resources to support them.

For training programs to be successful, a thorough training evaluation plan also needs to be established. Partnering with human resources leaders not only helps to share the social and emotional skill set, but also personal management solutions and paths that support a health company culture. Establishing clear metrics with measurable results not only gives data clues to areas of improvement, but also helps to validate the need for in-depth company bias training programs.

As part of a well-rounded unconscious bias solutions strategy, providing clear leadership behavior examples, realistic training goals, and emotional intelligence development, their needs to be a support system in place. Unconscious bias training may happen on an annual basis, but providing emotional regulation tools, conflict management approaches, scientific breakthroughs on monitor bias, and mentorship will set the employees up for a better chance of success,

Data in a future study could look at be analyzed to look at the way intersectionality is also woven into conscious and unconscious bias and how employees develop emotional

intelligence in these conditions. With this research, advanced solutions and improved bias training practices can be created.

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### **Appendix A: Interview Questions**

1. What has been your experience with bias in the workplace?
2. How have you worked to monitor your own unconscious bias?
3. What do you believe the solutions are to fixing unconscious bias in performance management?
4. When participating in unconscious bias training, what was your experience?
5. When conducting unconscious bias training, what was your experience?
6. What made your training successful?
7. What would you like to see change in unconscious bias training?
8. What do you think are some of the misconceptions about unconscious bias?
9. What has not been successful post UB Training?
10. What do you see as the biggest barrier to employees changing their behavior around bias training?
11. How has technology impacted bias at your company?

## Appendix B: Unconscious Bias Training Outline

1. Welcome trainees, trainer conducts and icebreaker activity to build rapport and break down barriers.
  - A. Suggested activity: each employee share three facts about themselves, of which only two facts are true. The other attendees guess which the untrue statement is.
  - B. Brief discussion, Questions for trainees:
    - i. Who had things in common with other people in the room?
    - ii. What experiences do you and your teammates share?
2. Introduction to Unconscious Bias
  - A. The science behind bias, why humans have it
    - i. Examples of when bias helps us
    - ii. Examples of how bias has evolved in humans where it is harmful
  - B. Defining Bias as it relates to the workplace
    - i. The difference between unconscious bias and bias that is intentional
    - ii. Different types of unconscious bias in the workplace
      - Demographics of employees
      - Affiliations, hobbies groups
      - Hire like me, Halo effect, and other unconscious biases in personal management.
    - iii. Bias that is discriminatory or against Equal Opportunity laws
    - iv. The difference between unconscious bias, bias your aware of, and discriminatory decision making.
  - C. Group activity-View video and have open discussion.

- Suggested video: “Who, Me? Biased? By New York Times reporter Saleem Reshamwala.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/video/who-me-biased>
- Trainer shares example of how unconscious bias has affected them
- Employees are asked if they would like to share their experience.

### 3. Introduction to Emotional Intelligence-known as EQ or EI

#### A. Defining emotional intelligence

##### i. Five Distinct Areas of emotional intelligence:

- Self-awareness: “I understand what I am feeling.”
- Self-regulation: “I know how to manage my actions with all of my emotions.”
- Internal motivation: “I know I can do it!”
- Empathy: “I can imagine what it is like in someone else’s shoes.”
- Social skills: “I know how to express myself authentically and allow others’ to do the same.”

##### ii. The spectrum of empathy

- Pity: “I’m sorry for you.”
- Sympathy: “I feel for you.”
- Empathy: “I feel with you.”
- Compassion: “I am moved by you.”

#### B. Using emotional intelligence to Resolve Conflict

- Conflict by nature is not GOOD or BAD; it simply means a difference of opinion or interests and is inevitable in a workplace.

- It is important is to learn how to diffuse disagreements and strengthen bonds.
- Emotional intelligence—the ability to recognize and control our feelings—is the key to accomplishing this.
- Understanding our emotions and those of others allows us to react constructively and with empathy, no matter how tense the situation.

#### C. Effective steps to using your EI

- i. Remain calm, composed and kind, even if the other person is irritated or frustrated.
- ii. Make the goal of the conversation resolution and not winning.
- iii. Listen and look at the other person, and pay attention to facial expression, tone, gestures, body language or any other clues they are giving you.
- iv. Look at the perspective of your co-worker, even if it's challenging.
- v. Monitor your thoughts and judgement about the person.
- vi. Validate the other person's feelings.

#### D. Testing your EI

- i. Link will be email to you after training for your privacy

<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

- You do not need to share your answers with anyone.
- Your EI “score” is private and is only one suggested measurement of emotional intelligence.

- Our Emotional Intelligence is always evolving and adapting, it is our nature.