

Acknowledgement of bias is the key to tackling discrimination

VIEWPOINT

Diversity and inclusion are being taken more seriously than ever before. Legislation has obviously helped – not only to punish those found guilty of discrimination, but to create a climate of much greater awareness. And it is inconceivable that 20 or even 10 years ago, we would have been discussing whether Sir Menzies Campbell has been unfairly treated and maligned on the basis of his age.

The changes can be seen in organisations, too. Many leading organisations now have diversity policies and strategies, and the more commonplace these become, the greater the pressure on those that do not have them.

There is an established approach that could be considered best practice, which involves examining processes, creating network groups, diversity weeks, etc. And yet, despite all of this, change is occurring very slowly. For example, the unemployment gap between ethnic minorities and the general population has been around 15% to 16% for the past three decades. Women's pay in relation to men's has hardly changed over the past 20 years. Despite representing close to half the workforce, women are still a minority when it comes to senior positions. And across the European Union, women constitute, on average, just 10% of the highest level executives in the top 50 publicly quoted companies.

So how can such sustained effort over a couple of decades yield so little? The answer may lie within ourselves.

As human beings, we are all biased. Work we have been conducting at the University of Sheffield's Institute of Work Psychology



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has been focusing on our unconscious biases. We have found that many of us like to think of ourselves as being fair when asked to complete paper-and-pencil questionnaires on race or sex prejudice. These explicit

measures show very little prejudice. However, tests of unconscious bias show very different results. In other words, we may well not be aware of our own unconscious biases, which drive our behaviour, affect our decisions, and impact on our interactions with others.

Getting to grips with understanding unconscious bias has to be an important critical step in creating fair and inclusive workplaces. To do this, we need to create a climate where issues of bias can be discussed openly, calmly and rationally. Too often discussions become heated, defensive and unproductive.

Think about this, though: if we are all biased, then can we really be trying to blame others? None of us are blameless on this one, so no-one can put themselves on a pedestal.

I see part of the solution as a three-stage process:

■ First, we need to accept that we are biased: without this recognition there can be no progress.

■ Second, we need to understand what biases we really have. The Implicit Association Test, developed by US academics and available on the internet, can reveal this.

■ Third, we need to be able to discuss this with one another. We need to ensure that we challenge each other and remain vigilant



INNER VISION...
Understanding what goes on inside another person's head is no easy task.

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and alert, not only to our biases, but to those of others around us.

The frameworks, strategies, champions, network groups, and so on are all necessary but, in my opinion, insufficient. It reminds me of the story of the man found by a friend on his hands and knees under a lamppost outside his house after a night out drinking. His friend asks: "What are you doing?" He replies: "I dropped my front door key." His friend says: "How did you drop it here? It is quite a way from your door." To which he replies: "I actually dropped it over there, but the light is over here."

I cannot help thinking that we are doing the same with diversity and inclusion. By refusing to engage constructively with the issues of bias and prejudice, we may be choosing to look where the light is, and not where the key lies.