

We must acknowledge bias before eliminating it

Prejudice in the workplace is not always conscious, finds

Peter Davy

People are part of the problem. That is Professor Binna Kandola's take on the debate over increasing diversity in the workplace. And a growing number of companies are coming to the conclusion that he is right.

Kandola is co-founder of Pearn Kandola, a business psychology consultancy, and author of *The Value of Difference: Eliminating Bias in Organisations*. In it he argues that we all hold unconscious biases that affect how we treat others.

"The research points unequivocally to the fact that we are biased," he says. "It's natural and it's nothing to be ashamed of, but unless we acknowledge it we can't start addressing it."

These biases can be distinguished from conscious prejudice in a number of ways. For example, implicit association tests (see panel, right) by Kandola's company reveal that women are as likely as men to associate their own sex with more junior positions (and therefore also less likely to recruit or promote females to senior roles, according to the thinking).

That makes it all the more difficult to deal with inequalities. It means, for instance, that simply ensuring a gender balance on recruitment panels will not necessarily do anything to promote female recruitment. And it could explain why, despite long-held commitments to diversity in many organisations, they have struggled to meet their aspirations.

The engineering giant Arup is a

good example. It started re-examining its approach two years ago. "We think of ourselves as a fair and equitable organisation where people excel on the basis of merit, but our statistics

showed it was not happening as well as we would like," explains Sarah Bowden, diversity strategy co-ordinator. About 28 per cent of its staff were women; it wanted to increase that figure to 35 per cent (and 15 per cent of its leaders).

To reach those targets, Arup enlist-



People can't always be forced to change their behaviour

ed Pearn Kandola and built a programme that starts by identifying unconscious gender bias among staff, from the board down, and teaches participants techniques to combat them. That can be as simple as avoiding making decisions on recruitment or promotions when tired, under pressure or under the influence.

"In all those situations you are much more likely to revert to your unconscious biases," Bowden says.

Just explicitly reminding people to be fair and objective before making a decision can offset the tendency.

At American Express teaching

about the root of unconscious biases is part of the company's work with Barbara Annis, a US-based consultant, on Gender Intelligence. This seeks to dispel myths and assumptions about gender but also to explore the facts behind gender differences and how these influence behaviour.

"We are taking a scientific approach because a greater appreciation of those issues enables us to be more productive," says Kerrie Peraino, chief diversity officer at American Express. It wants women in a quarter of its most senior posts.

There is no panacea, however. For a start, telling workers that they are biased can be difficult initially — just one of the reasons why it is helpful to start the training at the top. And making people aware of their biases is only half the battle. The steps to address it are equally important.

PwC has run bias awareness training for more than five years but recently shifted its focus to making leaders responsible for promoting inclusively and being "open-minded towards difference".

"You can make people aware of the fact that they are biased but you cannot always force them to change their behaviour," warns Sarah Churchman, director of diversity. "Awareness doesn't always lead to action."

In fact it is still early days for most businesses looking at these areas. So evidence of the success of schemes in changing not just attitudes but outcomes will take time to come through.

Nevertheless, frustration with the

speed of change using traditional techniques is prompting more and more companies to look at it. As Sasha Scott, managing director at Inclusive Diversity, a consultancy, puts it: "Firms have been rolling out diversity training programmes in the UK for the past ten years and it is not really getting us anywhere."

It is hard to escape the conclusion that it may be time to try something different.

The name game

The implicit association test involves asking subjects to sort images or words into categories under the pressure of time. A subject may be asked initially to classify names, flashed up randomly on a computer, as male or female.

The test is then made more complex. Male names and words associated with careers, such as "office" are sorted together on one side; female names and family terms ("marriage") on the other. Then the pairs are changed, so that family terms must be grouped with male names and female names with career words. By recording the speed with which words are classified, it is claimed that such a test can pick up a subconscious link between family and females and careers and men.

Once such biases are uncovered there is a variety of ways to tackle them. PwC's training encourages staff to look out for "counter-stereotypes": examples of people who undermine common prejudices. It provides staff with links to videos from TED, the non-profit organisation which aims to spread innovative ideas, so they can watch the athlete Aimee Mullins talk about her prosthetic legs and perceptions of the disabled, for example.

It is about challenging preconceptions. For example, Mullins comments that women with breast implants are not branded as being disabled.

Sue Rigby at PwC says: "When I was asked to do the training I was slightly indignant that I should need diversity training

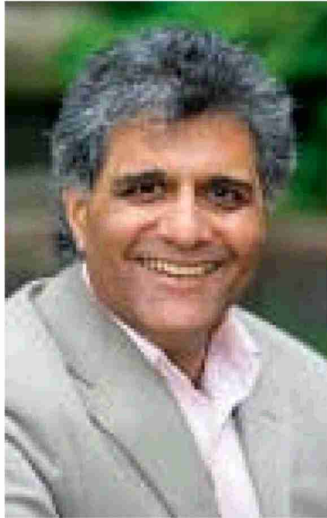
after 25 years with the firm."

She quickly became engrossed, however, and it hit home after listening to Chimamanda Adichie, the Nigerian novelist, talk about the dangers of "single stories" – how literature and the media can shape perceptions of countries, continents and their people.

"I thought, wow, I'm just the same. I do form views quite quickly. I am that person."

https://implicit.harvard.edu/www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/aimee_mullins_prosthetic_aesthetics.html

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Professor Kandola: bias is natural