

## 6 ways to help your organization be more inclusive

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Tags: Addressing Unconscious Bias, Articles, Overcoming Unconscious Bias

It takes courage to stand up to bias and advocate for a welcoming and fair culture at your organization. But courage alone won't ensure that you actually make a difference.

These strategies can increase your chances.

*Important Note: This article does not cover responding to illegal behaviors, such as discrimination and harassment. The line between unconscious bias and these illegal behaviors isn't always clear. If someone's behavior may have crossed this line, be sure to review your company's policies on harassment and discrimination, which may require you report the incident, or contact HR for clarification.*



### 1. Model fairness and inclusivity in your own behavior.

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It feels good to support a cause and think, "I'm an ally," but beware the common trap of thinking that just because you're in favor of reducing bias, you're doing all you need to. Some diversity experts suggest that the most effective thing you can do to address unconscious bias is to focus less on changing others' behaviors — and more on changing your own.

So, where in the course of your work could you be more vigilant about disrupting bias-prone behaviors? Maybe you could reconsider the people you ask to give input on a project, those you choose to invite to meetings, or the way you word an email. For ideas of where to look and inclusive behaviors to try, see 8 work areas where you're prone to unconscious bias and take our self-assessment to gain insight on where your preferences and biases may be negatively affecting your team.

As with any skill, identifying bias and becoming more inclusive takes ongoing exploration and practice. When you find a tactic or approach that works for you, share it with others to spread your positive impact (see No. 4 for more).

## 2. Show support for and learn from people who have been the target of bias.

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One of the most powerful ways to understand the insidious and harmful nature of unconscious bias is to hear the personal, real experiences of people you know. Just about everyone has a story — if you ask. We heard from a woman who was patronizingly asked to be a “booth babe” at an industry conference and a business development rep who saw a huge increase in responses to his email pitches after changing his name from Ta’Darrell to Darrell.

Simply hearing these stories doesn’t fix things, but it does give you the opportunity to show support (e.g., *“I’m sorry that happened to you”*) and raise your awareness of the kinds of behaviors you should watch out for — in yourself and others.

And while it’s not fair to expect people from target groups to teach you how to address bias, sometimes it does make sense to seek their expertise. For example, as part of his hiring process, experienced manager Shahan Mohideen recruited candidates who were military veterans. Once he had resumes in hand with military-specific job titles and experiences he didn’t recognize, he asked for help from a veterans’ group on LinkedIn and colleagues who are veterans. “I apologized in advance and pleaded ignorance,” he explains, “and said, ‘I need help reading these resumes.’”

## 3. Develop a few responses you can use when you encounter instances of potential bias.

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Publicly calling out people as biased is much more likely to make them feel defensive or ostracized than it is to inspire them to change their behavior. A subtler, more effective approach: Ask people to clarify or reconsider a comment or behavior in a way that gives them a chance to save face (after all, most people don’t intend to be biased).

Think of a few helpful responses ahead of time, so you don’t draw a blank and say nothing or say something in the moment that you regret. Good options include questions you ask in a genuinely curious tone and phrases that share your own experience and/or that assume positive intent (e.g., *“I don’t think you meant it this way, but ...”*).

A few examples you could use or modify for your situation:

- *“I’m not sure I understand — what do you mean by X?”*
- *“Do you think this is a problem with the person, or could it be a perception problem? Or something else that we aren’t aware of?”*
- *“How did you come to that conclusion?”*
- *“I haven’t experienced that with this person. Do you perhaps mean assertive rather than abrasive?”*

- *“I know you didn’t mean it this way, but some might find your comment demeaning.”*
- *“I know you didn’t mean it this way, but some might see the image in that campaign as biased. Under the title ‘suspicious solicitors,’ the man in the picture is a person of color. Could we talk through some ideas to avoid that negative perception?”*
- *“I realize that some people might be okay with that term, but I’m uncomfortable with it. Would you be open to using X instead?”*

#### 4. Team up with diversity-minded colleagues to enact group strategies.

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A chorus is more powerful than a single voice. Depending on your situation, you could:

- **Devise team tactics and share them across your organization.** For example, if your company lacks robust hiring practices to reduce bias, create your own when it’s time for your team to hire (or offer to work with your manager to do so). Enlist your direct reports to help you define the role’s core competencies and a candidate rating system, or to serve as judges for test projects. Or maybe you can work with peers to research job posting sites that reach diverse candidates or events where you can source a diverse candidate pool — then share those resources with other hiring managers across the company.
- **Amplify others’ good ideas in meetings.** Sometimes all it takes is one good listener to stop a group from overlooking or co-opting a person’s good idea (e.g., *“Hae-Won brings up a good point. Could we spend a few minutes talking about it?”*). When you ask others to join you in amplifying good ideas from diverse sources, your group has the power to shift your meeting culture from one where the loudest or most powerful voices prevail to one where the best ideas —with proper credit given — prevail.
- **Strategically work with teammates to influence your manager.** This may be manipulative, but it can also be helpful, especially when it’s approached constructively. One employee told us about their busy-but-well-intentioned manager who sometimes made hasty or potentially biased decisions: *“There are three of us who coordinate how we will talk about an issue with our manager in our 1-on-1s and team meetings. If he hears our message enough times during the week, he often sees the reasoning and takes our recommendation.”*

#### 5. Speak to your manager and/or your HR department about the importance of diversity and inclusion at your organization.

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What can one person do against systemic ills, such as a lack of diversity in hiring or just plain apathy toward diversity and inclusion? More than you might think — especially if you're persistent.

It all starts with talking about the issue and encouraging others to do the same. In certain environments, speaking up carries political risk. Choose your battles carefully, make your good intentions clear, and team up with others in order to both reduce risk and increase your chance of success.

Ideas to try:

- **If your organization has an engagement survey, use it to give detailed feedback.** Particularly if you feel left out at your company, you may cynically disregard employee surveys. But they provide an easy, anonymous way to share your unvarnished views with the executive team. And if several people mention the same issue, it's much harder to dismiss.
- **Flag messages you notice that could hurt the organization's image.** Let's say the images on your company's About Us page show a sea of similar faces or a marketing campaign risks co-opting a cultural symbol. It's worth sharing your observations with higher-ups, along with your well-intentioned reason for raising the issue (e.g., *"It's important to signal that our company values inclusion — for the sake of our customers and our employees"*). Even if nothing changes right away, your speaking up plants seeds that will grow when the next person raises the issue.
- **Ask HR for statistics — and transparency — on diversity.** Is your organization collecting data on hiring demographics and pay or promotion disparities? If not, suggest to HR that it start. If so, ask for those results to be published company-wide — research suggests that disclosure leads to gap reductions — and share your reasons for asking (e.g., *"That way, we'll all be able to take pride in what we're doing well — and be empowered to help improve the areas where we're falling short"*). The same goes for engagement survey results — even a question as simple as "Do you feel like you belong here?" can help gauge whether your organization has an inclusive, healthy culture, or one in need of support. If your engagement survey doesn't have inclusion-minded questions, you might send some ideas to your HR contact.
- **Request dedicated resources.** Diversity initiatives or culture committees that rely solely on people's good will and spare time rarely succeed. Instead, it takes budget and people whose jobs are at least partly dedicated to inclusion. If your company has an underpowered diversity engine, you could start small. For example, experienced manager Shahan Mohideen teamed up with other managers to persuade his company to hire a diversity consultant to train the HR department. The key, he says, was approaching executives and securing their support. From there, money and action followed.

## 6. Be careful not to overcompensate — which can invite additional biases.

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As you become more invested in shaping an inclusive culture around you, you may, ironically, become more susceptible to new bias pitfalls, like:

- **Assuming a level of familiarity that's unprofessional.** Just because you participate in diversity initiatives or have a diverse set of friends doesn't mean that you can tell a joke based on stereotypes or use a group-specific term at work. What you see as perfectly fine, given your comfort level, can be biased and hurtful in someone else's eyes.
  - **Giving fellow allies and people from underrepresented groups a pass for poor performance or behaviors.** It's easy to favor people who you're close to or who align with your mission. But it's not fair or helpful, especially if you consistently judge allies and underrepresented groups by an easier standard or shy away from giving them helpful critical feedback.
  - **Overattributing behaviors to bias.** When a decision or action seems unfair, it could be the result of bias — but it could also be the result of poor communication, misaligned expectations, or any number of other factors not visible to you. When in doubt, ask questions about the situation before jumping to the conclusion that it's simply a matter of bias.
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