

BUILDING INCLUSION 3.0

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Stereotyping is often something you “accuse” someone of. That’s a heavy, negative verb for a sensitive subject. Yet implicit bias — the subject en vogue for HR, leadership, and training and development — is remarkably similar and openly discussed. Where’s the line that separates these behaviors? What creates the difference?

Both refer to the mental shortcuts you take. The snap judgments about people based on your filters — appearance, personal experience, history, and culture, to name a few. You act on these filters and set in motion tangible consequences that have a pervasive impact on careers, relationships, opportunities, and possibilities.

There is one critical difference. You and I are aware of stereotypes because of sensitivity to and education on D&I. You know stereotypes are all around you. Our awareness and sensitivity make them popular fodder for stand-up comedians.

Louis C.K. on Native Americans: “All the humans were just walking around, with painted faces, just walking around. And they’d be like, ‘Ooh, that looks yummy,’ and they’d eat from the ground. And, they’d sleep on the grass...and they’d go for a swim, and they’d do a little dance. That was the whole continent, with just folks doing that.”

George Carlin on white Americans: “White people should never, ever, ever play the blues ever. What do white people have to be blue about? Banana Republic run out of khakis? The espresso machine is jammed?”

Wanda Sykes on being gay: “It’s harder being gay than it is being black. It is. There’s some things that I had to do as gay that I didn’t have to do as black. I didn’t have to ‘come out’ black. I didn’t have to sit my parents down and tell them about my blackness... ‘Mom, dad, there’s something I need to tell you. I hope you still love me. Mom, dad, I’m black.’”

I laughed when I watched these clips on Youtube, and I bet you’d do the same. I laughed both at the caricature of the stereotype and the audacity of using it. The idealistic picture of Native Americans; the belief that all whites are middle class and privileged; and, the ordeal of coming out to one’s parents. I was conscious of the lopsided images presented to me and for that reason found it funny. But, if someone “really” thought like that and acted on it they’d be hauled off for sensitivity training. Wouldn’t they? Or would they?

You think you have control over what goes on inside your own head. You typically catch yourself in stereotypical thinking and self-correct, and you wouldn’t consciously allow such thoughts to impact your actions because to do so would be morally wrong and hurtful.

This is where bias steps in. Bias is more complicated and subtle. It is the residue of those filters — stereotypes, our culture, and our personal experiences — and impacts our thinking and behavior, even when we try to act impartial.

Decades of research on bias repeatedly proves that we make assumptions, simplifications, categorize people, and prefer people who remind us of ourselves. When I feel an affinity for someone, I’m more likely to

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positively view what they do, I'm going to dig deeper into my memory to offer examples of their behavior that portrays them positively, and I'm going to put extra effort into my conversations when I recommend them to others. Is this also true for you?

When I feel less connected to someone, I am quicker to challenge information that portrays them positively, I need a higher quantity and quality of examples to alter my perception of them, I'm quicker to identify and more likely to remember the differences that separate us rather than what we have in common. Also true for you?

Is this stereotyping? No. Bias runs deeper than a limited idea of who someone is. Your brain processes millions of pieces of information every day. Unbeknownst to you, you are filtering and sorting information on a subconscious level keeps that hard drive between your ears from overheating. Categorization, pattern formation, and leaps in logic occur in fractions of a second. Bias impacts how you form opinions, who you make eye contact with while walking down the street, even how you use the internet to search for information.

To be biased is to be human; it is automatic, unconscious, and universal. Think of the impact. Bias infiltrates every aspect of your organization – recruiting, mentoring, training, promoting, and compensation, to name a few. It affects both individuals and teams. Consider group cohesion, how you listen to and value others' ideas and suggestions, employee engagement, and your ability to produce results.

How can you push through such a pervasive problem? You're trying to swim upstream against a primitive part of your brain that's resisted eons of human evolution. No problem can be solved by the same level of consciousness that created it. Education and awareness are the first steps. Then, it takes practice. And more practice. Consider implementing the following strategies:

- Have an accountability buddy. A facet of bias is that it's easier to spot in other people than in yourself. Ask someone to challenge you, your filters, and your decisions.
- Ask yourself how you reached a decision and/or completed a task.
- Follow up on discrepancies in information no matter who or what the subject is.
- Question your motivations. Are you being especially helpful or protective? Are you acting to please someone? Are you acting on an unconscious affinity?
- Was your report or opinion broader or narrower than was requested? What might the impact of that be?

Combatting bias to build inclusion is the next phase of D&I efforts – D&I 3.0. You have seen D&I as a compliance issue, and better understand the business case for it. Now, it is time to live it. Implicit bias is the largest obstacle impeding this success. Though pervasive, it can be minimized and mitigated through education, action, and practice.

For more information and further reading on Diversity & Inclusion, visit our [online library](#).



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Liz is a PhD. candidate with expertise in multiculturalism in the contemporary United States. She brings targeted knowledge on the recent shifts in the U.S. demographics, changing global attitudes, and the impact this has on her clients. She partners with firms and organizations to devise diversity and inclusion strategies that fit both their values and goals.

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