

How Mindfulness Can Reduce Unconscious Bias in the Workplace



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As a leadership coach and corporate facilitator, contemplative practices have played an integral role in my work for over 20 years. I specialize in organizational leadership, effectiveness, resilience, and wellbeing through the lens of contemplative practice. My work is grounded in research that intersects organizational behavior, psychology, organizational neuroscience, and contemplative science.

In addition, I have facilitated training sessions, led team discussions, and participated in expert panels about unconscious and conscious racial bias. These experiences along with my extensive research have solidified my belief that mindful inquiry is key to engaging in difficult conversations about unconscious bias.





Introduction



This booklet introduces mindfulness as an evidence-based strategy to engage in critical conversations about unconscious bias with heartfulness and compassion. It offers a way for leaders and teams to shape a more equitable work culture. Mindfulness teaches us how to observe our own thoughts and feelings without judgment or self-criticism. We can learn how to sit with all our feelings, even those that are uncomfortable. Mindfulness trains us to be okay with that discomfort and come to understand it will pass.

We are at a unique inflection point as a society with cascading implications for organizations across all sectors. Recent events have compelled us to recognize that conventional approaches to addressing racial and other forms of inequity are insufficient to transform work environments to be truly inclusive for all and bias free. And yet, many organizations are still missing a critical piece of the puzzle. Diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies are incomplete unless they address the internalized processes that underlie unconscious bias. When that occurs, organizations suffer employee churn as cultures become toxic and frustrated candidates start to look elsewhere. This loss of talent hinders company performance, and it tarnishes the reputation of the organization as an employer.

The state of affairs across the country calls for deep change and reevaluation of our highest values as a human family. We must all answer the call to change and it is imperative for all organizations to address inequities that inhibit the creation of diverse, inclusive, and bias-free cultures. An effective starting point is to begin addressing unconscious bias.



Why We Need DEI Strategies

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Organizations and institutions have had to confront the challenges of employee engagement and inclusion for an exceptionally long time. Diversity efforts have evolved from compliance driven approaches to those that recognize the imperative to establish cultures of inclusion that leverage all forms of diversity. Unfortunately, new challenges have emerged that reflect deepening expressions of exclusion, marginalization and bias. In many instances biases remain unexplored, unidentified, and unchecked. Systemic inequity persists.

While events over recent years have highlighted the insidiousness of racism, bias shows up across the many expressions of diversity. And yet, addressing the scourge of racism and racial bias may offer the best opportunity to understand the benefit of mindfulness across all dimensions of diversity.

We know that communities of color have been plagued by structural inequities in the United States. Key issues have surfaced repeatedly in recent months that bring these disparities into sharp focus. The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected communities of color. At the time of this writing, black people in the United States have died of COVID-19 at 1.4 times the rate of white people. The loss of American Indian and LatinX lives has been disproportionately high during the pandemic as well.

The killing of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and others brought racially-motivated violence once again to the fore. During the trial of the accused police officer in the killing of George Floyd, the nation saw an alarming wave of anti-Asian violence including a mass shooting in Atlanta that claimed the lives of six Asian women. It is well documented that many people believe Asian people are responsible for starting and spreading the corona virus.

The magnitude of racially motivated violence across the country highlights the need for change.



There is strong momentum to confront disparities and inequities still entrenched in many organizations. Private employers, public companies, governmental agencies, and nonprofit groups are embracing this opportunity to turn the metaphorical corner.

Many forward-thinking organizations have long understood they have a responsibility to address [social justice and inequity issues](#) in the workplace. They also have come to recognize the benefits derived from having a diverse and inclusive workplace including:

- Lower employee dissatisfaction.
- Greater employee productivity.
- Greater willingness and capacity to innovate and problem solve.
- Superior recruiting and employee retention results.
- Higher rates of revenue growth because of employee engagement.
- Stronger commitment to organization vision and mission.

Our collective understanding of this dilemma is evolving and the stakes are exceedingly high. It is now imperative we fully address issues that previously could easily be overlooked or dismissed as too thorny, too difficult, or too intangible to address. DEI strategies are the means by which companies can effect positive change to their bottom lines, in their corporate cultures, and in the world at large. Attracting and retaining new and innovative talent will require corporate cultures that take active measures to address workplace inequities and prioritize employee well-being.



Understanding Unconscious Bias



The human brain is flooded with information at every waking moment. The sheer volume and detail of everything we hear, see, feel, or think from moment to moment is extraordinary. Bias helps us to navigate that stimuli without being overwhelmed: allowing us to make quick decisions without having to sift through massive amounts of information.

Unconscious biases are automatic processes that happen without our awareness. Anytime we encounter an object, person, or situation the brain fast tracks the information and forms a perception. That shortened pathway is the birthplace of unconscious bias. Unfortunately, this process also lends itself to making fast judgments about people and groups. Such generalizations come from a lifetime of messages and associations that we internalize about people of different backgrounds, whether through mass media, anecdote, or past experience.

The mind relies on old, patterned thinking, internalized throughout our lifetimes that are shaped by our friends and family, peers at school or colleagues in the workplace. Wider society also contributes to our patterned thinking and what we internalize via the media and other societal actors. Understanding the brain's role in arriving at judgments that are biased allows us to remove the emotional aspect from the equation.

When someone is first confronted with the notion that these unconscious biases do in fact exist, their reaction is often defensive and uncomfortable: "I am not a racist," or "I do not see color," or "I treat everyone the same." These are typical responses when people initially begin to explore the problem of unconscious bias.

Understanding that biases exist can take some time and careful navigation because there is a tendency to shame and blame. Conversations are often uncomfortable and sometimes quite polarizing. Mindful inquiry helps coworkers to navigate these feelings and work on modifying behaviors to promote better inclusion.



How Mindfulness Reduces Unconscious Bias

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“ Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom”.

– Viktor Frankl

Mindfulness is the English translation of a Sanskrit term that simply means awareness or attention. Mindfulness is the practice of bringing conscious awareness to our thoughts. It gives us the space we need internally to avoid automatic reactivity and to respond intentionally instead.

Mindful awareness activates regions of the frontal brain and facilitates our ability to plan, problem-solve, and make judgments. Mindfulness sensitizes us to these unconscious processes, allows us to observe our thoughts and feelings without judgment or reactivity, and to distance ourselves from hasty judgments and knee-jerk reactions.

Mindfulness training reduces unconscious bias because it:

- Interrupts the cycle of automatic, habitual responses.
- Strengthens our prefrontal cortex and thus reduces the amygdala's response.
- Makes the unconscious conscious.
- Improves the ability to be present and attentive.
- Cultivates the mind and improves higher thinking.

Mindfulness is an evidence-based approach that creates safe spaces for self-inquiry. It helps us to engage in challenging conversations with compassion, objectivity, and neutrality. Specifically, mindful inclusion invites us to:



ENGAGE IN SELF REFLECTION

When we train our minds to become more aware of our own thoughts, we learn to take regular inventory of our emotions, physical sensations, and how our body responds to the messages our mind is receiving. This self-reflection opens the door to critical evaluation.

REDUCE COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

Reactivity underlies unconscious bias, breeding dualistic and polarized thinking. We see things as we believe they ought to be or what our patterned thoughts conclude they must be. Mindfulness develops our ability to engage in “right thinking” and “right seeing,” which is seeing things for how they actually are, not what we think they should be.

ENGAGE IN DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

As we develop our minds to see things more clearly, our communication skills reflect that inner wisdom. We are better equipped to have difficult conversations in a compassionate, neutral, non-harming way.

EXPERIENCE UNCOMFORTABLE FEELINGS

A key aspect of mindfulness is observing our own thoughts and feelings without judgment or self-criticism. It teaches us to watch, feel, and sit with all of our feelings, even those that are uncomfortable or unpleasant. It trains us to be okay with that discomfort and come to understand that it will pass.

BROADER BENEFITS OF MINDFULNESS

The benefits of practicing mindfulness are extensive, varied, and widely researched. Here are three broad categories that illustrate the positive power of mindfulness:



IMPROVED WELL BEING

When we talk of wellbeing, we are referring to our level of satisfaction, comfort, and happiness with our lives. It relates to our connectedness or lack thereof to others, our ability to handle inevitable adversity and the challenges we face. We learn to celebrate our successes and to live in the here and now rather than dwell on past failures or future concerns. Mindfulness has been shown to improve wellbeing in general and specific ways. There is more to be gained for those who practice mindfulness, in and outside of work.

BETTER PHYSICAL HEALTH

Mindfulness, conducted entirely inside one's own mind, leads to better physical health for the regular practitioner. Our bodies and minds are inextricably connected. Taking care of our minds through meditation and other mindful practices has been clinically proven to reduce stress (known to cause disease and illness), improve heart health, lower blood pressure, improve sleep quality, reduce chronic and sporadic pain, and relieve digestive difficulties.

IMPROVED MENTAL HEALTH

The demands of modern life take a major toll on our mental health. Americans suffer from depression and anxiety at alarmingly high rates. Lack of access to mental health services means many of us are left to deal with these conditions on our own. Mindful practices are now regularly recommended by primary care physicians, psychologists, therapists, and social workers as a front-line defense against mental health disorders and as complements to medical treatment and talk therapies.

There is absolutely no doubt that mindfulness can lead to concrete, positive changes and improvements in our lives, personally and professionally. As it relates to DEI initiatives, mindfulness training and practice is an effective means of targeting and mitigating conscious or unconscious bias.

DEMYSTIFYING MINDFULNESS

For those who are unfamiliar with the practice of mindfulness, it is a word that may conjure up images of meditating gurus levitating in lotus position. In reality it is far less mystical. As stated earlier, mindfulness is simply the practice of bringing awareness to present thoughts. You don't need any special tools or equipment but you do need practice.



Mindfulness is not a skill you learn and master. It is a practice that is never “done.” There is no real right or wrong way to be mindful and it is highly individualized. The only real requirement is that it be an ongoing pursuit. The more you practice being mindful, the more second nature it becomes and the more beneficial it will be.

You can practice mindfulness while sitting, standing, lying down, exercising, or moving. You can set aside regular time to do it, or you can strive to make it an integral part of how you think and make your way through every day.

In fact, there are countless ways in which you may be practicing mindfulness already without even knowing it. Mindfulness is not just meditation. It is also:

- Leaving your phone on silent during dinner to give your family your full attention.
- Taking a few deep breaths before entering an important conversation.
- Stopping to literally smell the roses while out for a walk.
- Or sitting outside with a cup of tea and listening to the birds and your own thoughts.

It is powerful, it is peaceful, it is connective, and it is life changing. But it is also accessible to each and every one of us.



Mindful Inclusion to Complement DEI Initiatives



Unconscious bias perpetuates unspoken inequalities in insidious ways, making it an enemy of equity and inclusion. Mindfulness training can purposefully target this pattern of thinking to target unconscious bias directly making it an invaluable component of any DEI initiative. But that isn't the only reason leaders should implement mindfulness programs in their organizations.

There are many potential benefits that go beyond just addressing unconscious bias when teams are trained in mindfulness and practice it in their workplace cultures. An extensive body of literature documents the psychological and physiological benefits of mindfulness-based practices, which support employees in areas such as:

- resilience and effectiveness.
- productivity and performance.
- job satisfaction.
- stress reduction and anxiety.
- critical thinking and concentration.
- enhanced sleep quality.
- sense of joy and well-being.

Although conversations about racial bias can be daunting, leaders can and should tackle these issues head on. Doing so can ultimately improve staff wellness, support worker retention, and foster a more inclusive environment. Leaders can implement diversity and inclusion strategies that incorporate mindfulness as a key practice.

For more information on how to train your team in mindful inclusion, please [click here](#) or contact me directly at td@thulani.com.

