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Leadership

The New Face Of Workplace Discrimination

Michael Morris and Susan Fiske 11.12.09, 8:56 PM ET

Discrimination at work has come a long way in recent decades. It has learned to conceal itself even from those who make it happen. But it's still there, despite decades of activism, legislation and human resources programs to counter it and to promote an appreciation of diversity.

Why is it so stubborn? Part of the problem is that we're used to thinking that all prejudice against stereotyped groups--whether based on race, creed, culture, gender, age or sexual orientation--looks alike. Most laws, policies and personal efforts to prevent stereotypes from affecting decisions are premised on the traditional view that prejudice arises from strongly negative attitudes and overtly derogatory beliefs about social groups or categories.

Emerging evidence in social psychology and neuroscience reveals, however, that prejudice comes in qualitatively different forms that have to be managed in different ways. In fact, the kinds of prejudice faced by most groups don't fit the traditional image. A recent Columbia Business School conference, "Inclusive Leadership, Stereotypes, and the Brain," brought together business leaders and academic researchers to share some of the new wisdom about the psychology of prejudice and the new ways that firms such as Allura Capital, Ernst & Young and Goldman Sachs have worked to become more inclusive.

In the keynote presentation at the conference, Susan Fiske, a Princeton University psychologist (and one of the authors of this article), presented her finding that people judge others on two fundamental characteristics: warmth and competence. Warmth is a matter of positive or negative intentions. Another person is either friend or foe, with you or against you. Competence involves that person's effectiveness: He or she is either capable or not of realizing those intentions. Fiske's research across many countries has found that a group's place in the social structure predictably determines those assessments, which in turn determine our sometimes unconscious emotional responses and ultimately our discriminatory behavior toward members of a group. What's most striking about this view is that it identifies four different kinds of prejudice that can be destructive to workplace inclusiveness.

The four kinds of prejudice appear in the two-by-two quadrants made by crossing the model's dimensions of perceived warmth and competence. The model captures purely positive and negative prejudice as well as some more subtle forms of ambivalent prejudice. Groups such as the middle class fall into the high-warmth, high-competence quadrant. Members of groups seen this way evoke admiration and approach responses that in the workplace translate into getting hired and mentors. While such responses are no doubt warranted for many middle-class people, for others they amount to undeserved favoritism. In direct contrast, groups perceived as low-warmth, low-competence, for example in the United States groups such as homeless people and undocumented immigrants, evoke disgust and an urge to avoid them.

The ways people's decisions can be affected by the differing emotions evoked by these two types of groups were elucidated by studies presented at the conference involving functional magnetic resonance imaging of brain activity. Lasana Harris, a researcher at New York University, described how he had presented research participants with ethical dilemmas such as a crisis decision about train routing in which the only way to save the lives of a group of people would involve killing a specific single person. When that person was described as homeless rather than middle-class, the participants were more likely to decide to take the action that would kill him.

Moreover, Harris found, homeless vs. middle-class individuals evoked less activity in participants' brain centers associated with empathy or mind-reading. They also evoked fleeting micro-expressions of disgust and contempt, signs of implicit emotional reactions under the surface of participants' conscious thinking about the decision. Such findings confirm what many businesses have been realizing, that contemporary discrimination is often less a problem of overt derogatory beliefs than of implicit emotions that can tip decisions about people when there is no clear right answer.

The most novel observations from Fiske's work involve ambivalent prejudice. High-warmth, low-competence stereotypes, such as those of the elderly or the disabled, engender emotional responses based on pity, which produce behaviors that both help and harm.

A manager who views a new employee as disabled may feel extra motivation to help that person learn the job's tasks, yet may also reveal an expectation of low competence. Such a patronizing response could not be more different from the outright antipathy traditionally associated with prejudice, yet it can be just as harmful in the workplace.

The final quadrant in the model is another kind of ambivalent prejudice characterized by a different emotion. Groups perceived as low-warmth and high-competence, including, in the U.S. Asians and Jews, elicit envy, which combines admiration for what the group has attained with a desire to take it from them given the chance. As Fiske explained in her presentation, the (biased) perception is that these socioeconomically ascendant groups have achieved their success by elbowing their way to the top at the expense of others. They are respected for their apparent competence but resented and sometimes sabotaged for their alleged lack of warmth.

Aren't such prejudices anachronistic? Sure, in terms of the conscious beliefs that most managers endorse. Yet that doesn't make us immune to what we have absorbed from the popular culture. Prejudice in the workplace today takes the form of exclusion or overt hostility far less often than it did in our parents' or grandparents' time. It hides away instead in unconscious emotions of admiration, disgust, pity or envy that can color managers' everyday judgments and evaluations of other people.

Discrimination may be ever so slight, yet many of us have seen its effects. Two individuals of the same experience and capabilities but different backgrounds can be nudged along very different paths. Fiske explained that even slight favoritism accumulates to build dramatic discrepancies, "At every decision point in a person's career, these tiny biases multiply like compound interest," she said. (Moreover, there are few legal remedies for victims of this kind of bias, Susan Sturm, a professor at Columbia Law School, pointed out at the conference.)

Which all leads to a big challenge for managers: How do you address subtle instances of bias that are difficult to identify? One clear implication is that diversity efforts focused merely on recruiting entry-level employees from a broad spectrum of ethnic, nationality and class backgrounds—what Laura Liswood, a senior adviser to Goldman Sachs, called the "Noah's Ark approach"—are destined to fail.

The problem is that discrimination, largely unintended and largely invisible, occurs in everyday activities such as task assignments, informal mentoring and performance appraisals. Liswood conducted focus groups of finance-industry professionals who were a mix of white men, white women, nonwhite men and nonwhite women. She found that the white men tended to believe their firms were meritocracies, but all the other groups cited many kinds of discrimination they had experienced and observed.

Why hadn't the white men seen that? As Liswood said, those who thrive in a workplace that has subtle inequities tend not to notice that they are advantaged. When diversity efforts focus exclusively on recruiting, the result is too often that the firm hires people because they are different but then fails to promote them—precisely because they are not the same.

So how can we as managers monitor our prejudicial impulses and prevent them from guiding our behavior? A good first step is to become aware that prejudice comes in different forms. We may act with prejudice toward groups that we think or feel positively about in some ways. Conversely, the people we mentor of different backgrounds will experience the same workplace differently, depending on the warmth and competence associations imposed on them because of their backgrounds.

Finally, we may need to acknowledge having been favored or given the benefit of the doubt ourselves because of implicit evaluations, more than we'd like to admit. In the business world, inclusive leadership means venturing beyond one's own perspective. It's not just a matter of fighting blatant, intentional acts of discrimination. That's the easy part.

Michael Morris is the Chavkin-Chang professor of leadership at Columbia Business School and director of its Program on Social Intelligence, which sponsored the conference in conjunction with its Sanford C. Bernstein & Co. Center for Leadership and Ethics. Susan Fiske is the Eugene Higgins professor of psychology at Princeton University and received a 2009-'10 Guggenheim Award for writing about the emotions of envy in people's upward social comparisons and scorn in their downward comparisons.