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Leading Teams

Are You Aware of Your Biases?

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Summary. Often, it's easy to “call out” people when we notice their microaggressions or biased behaviors. But it can be equally challenging to recognize and acknowledge our own unconscious biases. That said, becoming aware of your shortcomings can help you hone your... [more](#)



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When I became a manager for the first time, I had a clear vision of my leadership style: I wanted to value my team and treat everyone with respect. Once I took charge, I learned that leadership wasn't as simple as I'd first imagined it.

A direct report, Bob, had joined the team right after high school (and before I'd joined). He had no college degree or certifications to his credit. Unconsciously, I assumed Bob was less capable than others on the team and began to assign him less challenging projects, because certifications show expertise, right?

"Why aren't you assigning Bob on that new project?" a peer asked me one day. The more we discussed it, the more I realized that I'd *assumed* others to be more capable than Bob merely because they had a college degree. I was inadvertently discriminating against Bob and treating him differently.

As I worked to correct my behavior towards him, I realized how much I'd been unaware of his skills because of my biases. He was the to-go person for anyone who needed help in solving the most complex challenges, he was an avid learner, and he knew his stuff.

What I learned from this experience was that our intentions are worthless without thoughtful action. While I "intended" to create a team where everyone felt equal, I had failed to put that intention into practice. Recognizing I had biases unknown to myself but visible to others pushed me to investigate the other ways in which I might have been unintentionally undermining or holding back my team.

Often, it's easy to "call out" people when we notice their microaggressions or biases. But it's challenging to recognize and acknowledge these behaviors in ourselves. When we choose to become aware of our shortcomings, we can use what we discover to inform our leadership style and correct (or avoid perpetuating) discriminatory behavior.

Here are a few strategies that have helped me on my journey to becoming a more inclusive leader.

1) Acknowledge that you have biases. Then, educate yourself to do better.

It's important to become aware of our unconscious biases and work towards change.

I grew up in a privileged environment where attaining a "higher education" was considered the path to success. For most of my life, I believed that expertise and capability were strongly correlated with your level of education. That harmful and limiting assumption clouded my judgment of Bob and his skills.

To become aware of your unconscious biases, start by educating yourself.

Paying attention to your thoughts and examining your beliefs can help you identify the assumptions you currently hold. For example, do you believe that people will always speak up when they disagree? Do you think that showing your emotions — or crying at work — is a sign of weakness? How do you feel when someone misses a deadline? Do you automatically assume that they are unproductive or incapable, or are you able to extend empathy and listen to their reasons?

The key is to slow down and investigate your beliefs and assumptions so that you can see the other person for who they truly are. As a leader, it's easy to think that you don't have time to

pause. But taking a few minutes to question yourself can make all the difference to you and your team. Here are some other questions you can reflect on:

- What core beliefs do I hold? How might these beliefs limit or enable me and my colleagues at work?
- How do I react to people from different backgrounds? Do I hold stereotypes or assumptions about a particular social group?
- As a manager, do I acknowledge and leverage differences on my team?
- How would my team describe my leadership style if they were sharing their experience of working with me to others?
- Do my words and actions actually reflect my intentions?
- Do I put myself in the shoes of the other person and empathize with their situation, even if I don't relate to it?

When you pay attention to your answers, you'll find patterns of thinking that will help you become aware of other biases that you may have.

When I did this exercise, I realized that I was undervaluing people who were quiet in meetings because I assumed that they didn't have anything to contribute. But the truth was that I wasn't creating an inclusive environment for them to open up or share their thoughts. To overcome this bias, I started sending out meeting agendas in advance. I also checked in with my quieter team members during our one-on-one meetings to assure them that I valued their contributions and brainstorm ways to help them speak up.

2) Let others challenge your assumptions.

Our view of ourselves is made up of our life experiences and the lessons we learn along the way. We typically develop unconscious biases as a result of the things we were taught and the

observations we made throughout our childhoods and adolescence — at home, at school, in conversations with friends, and through the media we consumed (and still do).

When someone challenges these long-held beliefs and values, it can be uncomfortable. Instead of getting defensive, pay attention to your immediate reaction. Before acting, take a breath and try to shift your mindset. Approach the situation from a place of curiosity and positive intent. Here are some ways to have a conversation when someone points out your microaggressions or problematic behaviors.

- “I really appreciate you sharing that with me. What else did you notice that I should be aware of?”
- “I hadn’t thought about it this way until you shared your views. Would you say more?”
- “Thank you. I didn’t realize that. I’m committed to growing my leadership and am aware we all have unconscious biases. What else can you share with me about the impact of my actions?”

Your mistakes are not dead-ends. Every confrontation is an opportunity to learn and improve your leadership. These discussions will open you up to seeking feedback from others, who can become the catalyst to help you uncover your biases.



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3) Be open to feedback.

It's human to crave affirmation, especially when you're a leader. But doing right by people requires that you constantly look at how your behaviors, actions, and words impact your team.

Reach out to a diverse group of peers to understand how they perceive you and what you can do better. People whose perspectives and opinions differ from yours are more likely to provide you with insightful feedback. You could say, "I value your opinion and am curious about the impact of my leadership style. Would you be willing to have a conversation about this? Is there something I can improve upon that will have a positive impact on the team?"

Then, listen with the intent of learning something new. Remind yourself that honest feedback will help you grow and develop self-awareness.

This is a situation I have personally faced at various points throughout my career. On one occasion, for example, I had a particularly strained relationship with a direct report. Once we discussed the issue privately, I learned that she felt I was micromanaging her and diminishing her experience. From my perspective, I thought I had been helping her overcome challenges. While the feedback was hard to hear, I had to remind myself that it wasn't personal. My goal was to enable my direct report in the ways that worked best for her.

Once you identify your own weak areas and decide what changes you'd like to make, you'll likely need support to help you follow through. In my case, my direct report and I scheduled a fortnightly check-in during which she could share updates and concerns. You can similarly hold yourself accountable by sharing your goal with a mentor or a trusted colleague. Choose someone who will encourage you and push you to re-commit when you are struggling.

4) Embrace diverse perspectives.

You shouldn't just receive feedback from people whose world views vary from your own, you should make an effort to regularly interact and build meaningful relationships with them. Even if you end up engaging in healthy debates, the experience will broaden your mindset and encourage you to become a more inclusive (and creative) person. Cultivating a diverse network is a great way to do this.

When I originally looked at my network, I found that many of my friends and colleagues “looked” like me. They came from similar backgrounds, levels of privilege, and social capital. These kinds of networks can often turn into echo chambers where people share similar thoughts and opinions.

I encourage you to take a critical look at your network as well. Do you need to expand it? If the answer is “yes,” try joining an Employee Resource Group (ERG) that will help you connect with people from different backgrounds who may share your interests. Similarly, you can seek out community groups on LinkedIn to meet professionals from around the world.

If you want to expand your circle of friends at your current job, try to be more intentional about who you reach out to. Invite people outside of your immediate team for a coffee break or virtual lunch. This could be other leaders in your company, peers in other departments, or any colleague with who you have yet to connect with. Use the time to get to know them — ask about their work and their lives. Go in with the expectation that people are going to be different than you (in all kinds of ways) and appreciate those differences when they show up.

Finally, keep in mind that there are simple ways to expand your perspective outside of networking with other people. One thing that has helped me diversify my thinking is the media I consume: the books I read, the podcasts I listen to, and the people I follow on social platforms. In my early career, for example, I'd only read

— and was only encouraged to read — leadership books written by white, male authors (not surprising). Now, I intentionally search for and pick up books by authors of all races, genders, and nationalities to expand my outlook.

Learning to embrace diverse perspectives may feel challenging at first, but making a conscious effort will help. Change – of any kind – is uncomfortable. The most important thing you can do as a leader is prepare for that discomfort. Every phase of your leadership journey will require that you take time to introspect and emerge more self-aware. That is what will allow you to grow and flourish.

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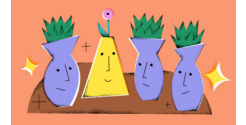
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