Engage for Success: Inclusion and Engagement Special Interest Group

Inclusive Engagement & Unconscious Bias

Ian Dodds, Engage for Success
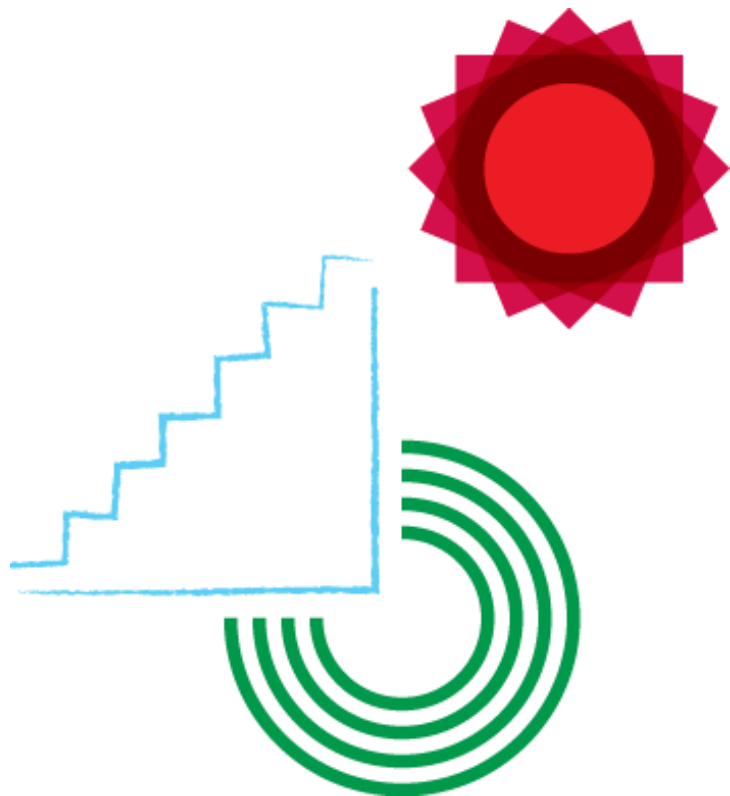8 January 2013

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Engagement leads to many significant business benefits:

It enhances performance:

Firms with engagement scores in the top quartile averaged 12 per cent higher customer advocacy, 18 per cent higher productivity and 12 per cent higher profitability;

The EPS (Earnings Per Share) growth rate of organisations with engagement scores in the top quartile was 2.6 times that of organisations with below-average engagement scores *(Gallup 2006)*

It increases innovation:

Higher levels of engagement are strongly related to higher levels of innovation. Fifty-nine per cent of engaged employees say that their job brings out their most creative ideas against only three per cent of disengaged employees *(Gallup 2007)*

Yet there is much evidence that under-represented groups in organisations often experience lower levels of engagement. For example, in North America and Northern Europe government, industry and commerce, education, health, etc., have historically evolved under the direction of white, heterosexual, educated men. This has often resulted in the cultures within them developing in line with the values and characteristic practices of this group. Hence, they tend to possess white, masculine cultures. This results in individuals who are not white and male experiencing unconscious bias, which can limit their engagement, performance and their career progression. It not only manifests itself in the workplace, but also at customer, client and service user interfaces, resulting in lost revenue and business development opportunities.

This paper examines some of the existing research on this topic. It will then demonstrate the continuing existence of exclusion and unconscious bias from the observations of women and minority ethnic focus group participants' experiences in their organisations. Finally, it offers methodologies for building inclusive engaging cultures to gain significant business benefits.
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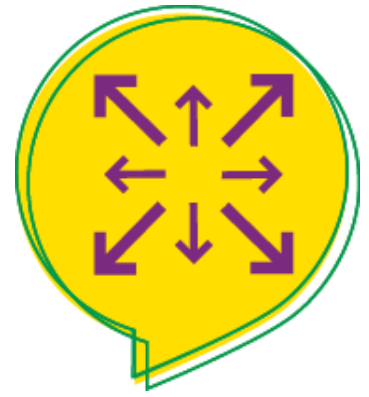
REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH RELATING TO THE NATURE AND CAUSES OF UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

As we are growing up we are given messages from parents, teachers, the media and others about people who look like us and people who are different to us. These often convey implications of superiority and inferiority, which become embedded in our sub-conscious. These unconsciously influence how we view people who are similar and different to ourselves. When we meet others this results in our making a judgment about them very quickly, and that judgment is based on the early messages that we have already stored and built up. So in a sense we prejudge everyone and we do this very quickly and without awareness. Invariably, this results in us having a preference for the ideas and opinions people who look like ourselves

So far, we have considered unconscious bias at the individual level. However, Professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter (RM Kanter, 1977) was one of the first researchers to recognise and draw attention to the presence of gender in early models of organisations. She observed that a "masculine ethic" of rationality and reason can be identified in the early image of managers.

This "masculine ethic" elevates the traits assumed to belong to men with educational advantages to necessities for effective organisations: 'a tough minded approach to problems; analytical abilities to abstract and plan; a capacity to set aside personal, emotional considerations in the interests of task accomplishment; a cognitive superiority in problem-solving and decision making.' This remains an issue in many organisations and results in unconscious bias in that male qualities dominate in the selection of talent and in the behaviours characteristically preferred and practised both in their workplaces and marketplaces.

Professor Joan Acker (J Acker, 1990) makes the point that 'conversation analysis shows how gender differences in interruptions, turn taking and setting the topic of discussion recreate gender inequality in the flow of ordinary talk'. This was vividly brought home to me in a coaching session I had with a woman who was a senior manager in an American global, technology company. I had feedback on her leadership from some of her colleagues and her team members and it was extremely positive. Consequently, I had been looking forward to sharing it with her; but 20 minutes into the coaching she burst into tears. Initially, she explained her behaviour on the grounds of being stressed as she was so busy. Then, 40 minutes later, as we were discussing the feedback, she told me that the real problem was what she had to put up with from her male colleagues. I asked what they did and was told that they interrupted her when she was talking and she never felt that her opinions and ideas were as valued by them as much as theirs.

This is a very common manifestation of unconscious bias. When I supported the senior woman I was coaching in sharing with her male colleagues the experience she had of their behaviour towards her they were shocked and confessed that they were utterly unaware that they were behaving in this way. Clearly, this woman's experience on unconscious bias from her colleagues was likely to mean that she felt discouraged from offering her opinions and ideas and, consequently, would be likely to be more disengaged. I have undertaken many interactive behaviour analyses of discussions in senior manager meetings and have often witnessed women being interrupted and talked over by their male colleagues.

Dr Elisabeth Kelan (E K Kelan, 2010) has pointed out that many researchers on women managers (S Gherardi, 1995; J Marshall, 1984; J Wajcman, 1998) have shown

that the practice of masculine script behaviours in managerial work is one way in which gender is portrayed, i.e. the ways of leading and managing that are automatically expected in organisations are associated with masculine traits. It is exactly in 'acting gender inappropriately' that women confront multiple problems in masculine work areas. Women are punished for not being 'woman' enough and so gender accountability, far from being ignored or disrupted, is redoubled. In other words, women experience a double bind in that they are expected to conform to the male norm; but when they do they can find that they face criticism for being unfeminine.

The 'masculine script' in North American and Northern European organisations can be extended to one which is also white, middle-aged, physically able and heterosexual; because this is the group that has traditionally held power and shaped organisational behaviour. Hence, not only women are subject to unconscious bias, but so too are other under-represented groups. Like the woman senior manager I referred to earlier they are interrupted more than their white, male colleagues and are likely to feel that their opinions and ideas are less valued. Mary Rowe (M Rowe, 1974) describes how this manifests itself in under-represented groups experiencing 'Micro inequities'. These are patterns of negative micro messages; for example being regularly interrupted, which can result in a lowering of self-esteem and some degree of disengagement.

EXAMPLES OF HOW UNCONSCIOUS BIAS PLAYS OUT IN ORGANISATIONS

In the last ten years Ian Dodds Consulting has conducted many focus groups to assess the climate for diversity and inclusion (D&I) in clients' organisations. These are structured on an affinity group basis, e.g. women's, men's, minority ethnic, disabled people's groups, etc. They are always facilitated by external consultants of the same affinity identity as the focus group participants, for example women facilitators with women's groups. This is to enable participants to be honest about their experiences of exclusion and inclusion and feel that these will be empathetically understood.

These have consistently demonstrated that unconscious bias is invariably present and that, as a result, the organisations' workplaces offer more engagement and advancement to white heterosexual, physically able men than to other affinity groups. In essence they do not offer inclusive engagement.

The following quotes obtained from women's focus group participants richly demonstrate the point:

"I feel patronised . . . . an effort is made to include us because we're women and not because we're good at our work."

"Women don't push themselves and there's nothing in (my company) to help pull us forward."

"Looking in, it looks like a boy's club (i.e. the senior management)."

"To get on you have to adopt a more male style – I lead a more masculine life (at work)."

"All senior posts come from the sales environment, which is male dominated."

"They take on people like themselves – who fit in with male comfort zones."

"Old boy network – like this for last 20 years – why fix what isn't broken."

"It's a long hour's culture and I feel guilty leaving at 5pm to collect my children."

"Getting on is all about bringing in the money . . . you have to be ruthless and disregard your colleagues."

"Women are more interactive and want to help people out."

"......in jokes with male-dominated environment – jokes about who should get tea."

"Roles are specifically male/female, i.e., males – services/sales and females HR/admin and projects."

"You have to work twice as hard to get your voice heard – male colleagues will then listen."

"Many men think that women only work in HR – stereotyping."

"The attitude is women don't want to get further."

"Being a woman is a barrier in itself."

These represent only a sample of many similar quotes that we have been offered and demonstrate that women in masculine organisations:

> Can see senior management as 'a boys' club'.
> Often have to adopt masculine behaviours in the more masculine culture, e.g. 'lead a more masculine life'; 'be ruthless and disregard your colleagues', that is, ambitious, individualistic behaviour; be less inter-active than they would naturally be and less supportive of colleagues; work long hours.
> Experience structural gender barriers to inclusion and advancement, such as promotions to senior management being made from functions which tend to be male dominated, for example sales, with organisations stereotyping different roles as male or female.
> Encounter attitudes about female levels of ambition; for example, 'women don't want to get further'.
> Have to work harder to get their voice heard.

The following are some quotes illustrating the same point from minority ethnic employees:

"Conversations take place and you do not feel part of them."

"We hear about something that affects you later than people not affected."

"Managers tend not to include us in decisions."

"The prejudice can be so subtle sometimes, you can't see it, but you can really feel it."

"Managers tend to stereotype people; for example, they see Asians as shy and Eastern Europeans as aggressive."

"Some managers can be patronising and condescending. For instance, one manager described his staff as 'these are my Asians and their English isn't very good but they don't mind me asking them to repeat themselves and they won't do anything without me'. He thought he was being supportive."

"We are not expected to want more, the attitude is BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) staff are already in the sweet shop, and now they want a ladder to reach the sweets on the top shelf."

"At our level, advancement is all about networking and communicating well, and this can work against minority ethnic staff if you are not seen as fitting in."

"Sometimes we are discouraged from advancing within the company with remarks such as 'you're fine where you are'."

"Minority ethnics are not given the chance, or get less chance, to advance within the company than other employees."

Again these represent a sample of many similar quotes that we have been offered from minority ethnic people and show that they:

> Experience exclusion, such as feeling outside of conversations or being overlooked in decision-making.
> Feel that they are stereotyped; for example, Asians being 'shy'.

> Encounter attitudes about levels of ambition, e.g., 'already in the sweet shop'; 'you're fine where you are'.

> Suffer from advancement depending on networking, and minority ethnic staff can have less access to what are often informal networking activities, such as socialising with more senior colleagues in a bar.

CASE STUDIES OF HOW ORGANISATIONS HAVE ADDRESSED UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

Thus far we have examined research evidence for unconscious bias and its impact on inclusive engagement in white, masculine organisations for individuals not of that identity. We have drawn then on experiential evidence from women and minority ethnic focus groups. It is clear that in many North American and Northern European organisations this is a phenomenon which results in everyday experiences of exclusion for individuals who are not white and male and limits their opportunities both for contributing fully and for promotion.

This restricts organisations' abilities to obtain the significant benefits available from fully accessing the richness of the 'cognitive' diversity present in them from having a diverse workforce. That is diversity encompassing: different thinking styles; learning styles; communication styles; aspirations; belief/value systems as well as people's attitudes and expectations; the range of 'mental models' shared by people from different backgrounds.

Creating an inclusive, engaging culture which embraces cognitive diversity is a vital driver for finding innovative solutions to the complex problems that businesses face, particularly in the current difficult economic climate.

Professor Scott E Page (S. E Page, 2007) has demonstrated mathematically that diversity consistently trumps ability in problem solving, providing that the members of the diverse group listen to each other and explore differing ideas and points of view. That is a diverse group will consistently outperform a homogeneous group of experts in solving a complex problem. It is clearly critical that organisations leverage the superior innovative problem solving capability from diversity and this requires a long-term strategic intervention to change white, masculine, organisational cultures into ones which are more inclusive, engaging and meritocratic for all. **This cultural change also needs to be supported by interactive behaviour training to enable diverse teams to listen actively to each other and explore differing ideas, opinions and points of view.**

Before this long-term, strategic culture change effort can begin it is almost always necessary to convince senior managers, many of whom tend to be white males, both intellectually and emotionally of the need to act.

This involves persuading them of the business benefits: the development and retention of a wider talent pool to promote from; enhanced business problem solving; better understanding of diverse markets; higher levels of performance through staff of whatever diversity feeling more fully engaged in helping the organisation succeed.

This is 'the intellectual argument'. However, an 'emotional impact' also has to be made. This is because the senior male managers believe in equality and in putting effort into D&I. However, they are generally unaware that their efforts are undermined by their unconscious biases.

This was first driven home to one of the writers of this paper when he was presenting the outcome of a global D&I diagnostic study for a well known global financial group. After seeing the quotes from the women focus group participants, the task force chair stated that he had never realised that the firm was in reality a meritocracy for white males and not for everyone as he had believed. It was the emotional impact of the quotes that resulted in the task force chair driving and sourcing activity to develop a culture which ensured that its meritocratic principle more fully encompassed women and other under-represented groups. The same writer was involved in a follow-up D&I assessment five years later for this firm and was amazed at the progress they had made in developing a more inclusive, engaging, meritocratic culture, especially for women.

Another means of making an emotional impact is to research stories of how unconscious bias plays out in the organisation for under-represented groups and then depict this by short pieces of drama.

One of the paper's writers led such an activity for a well-known global, technology company and, again, it was the emotional impact of discovering how women and minority ethnic people's performance, engagement and promotion opportunities were affected by unconscious bias that persuaded this firm's CEO that action needed to be taken to build a more inclusive, meritocratic culture. This firm has since extended these efforts to its marketplace through introducing activities to increase awareness on the part of sales employees of unconscious bias in their dealings with diverse customers and clients.

Once the emotional impact has been made and generated the senior management's will to act, it is then possible and productive to develop the long-term, change strategy which is necessary to transform the white, masculine culture to one which is more inclusive and meritocratic for everyone, whatever each individual's diversity identity.

CASE STUDY 1

An excellent example is a global organisation one of the writers worked with. It was awarded the World Diversity Leadership Summit Global Diversity Innovation Award for its efforts, an award in which entries were judged by a panel of Fortune 100 companies. This organisation's initiative was underpinned by classical transformational change methodology. Upfront the Board developed a vision of an inclusive, high performing, meritocratic organisation. This offered the workforce a picture of an organisation three years on, which would engage and embrace everyone's contributions and abilities more inclusively.

By doing this the vision described how it would improve its ability to: solve business problems more effectively and creatively; understand and meet service-users' needs better; improve their satisfaction with the services they received; promote from a broader talent pool, thereby increasing the proportions of under-represented groups in senior management. The Chief Executive recorded this vision on a DVD, which was viewed by its global workforce in a one-day behaviourally oriented workshop attended by everyone. Moreover, the workshops were inclusively composed so that they brought together people on a mixed basis across all levels of the hierarchy.

Research was conducted prior to the workshop programme delivery by the consultants to understand how exclusion and inclusion played out in the organisation's offices around the world. This involved interviewing employees from its different levels and a variety of locations both individually and in small groups. The research informed short drama illustrations of how exclusion played out in offices with the associated scenarios scripted by the consultant's business's theatre producer.

A key objective of the scenarios was to enable workshop participants, both in interactions with people of different diversity identities to themselves and in decision-making and problem solving, to understand how they were often not behaving and listening inclusively. The scenarios were also designed to offer interactive learning opportunities for participants to advise and shape the inclusive behaviour portrayed by the actors.

Finally, the workshops engaged participants in action planning in terms of how they would in future behave differently to be more inclusive. Participants were also required to formulate recommendations for their units' D&I Action Plans to increase inclusivity in relation to workplace activities and in relating to service users.

CASE STUDY 1 - RESULTS

This intervention was positive in its impact in that it resulted in high participant satisfaction scores. However, our experience is that one-off training interventions are insufficient to drive sustained, long-term change. The training needs to be reinforced. This was achieved by the consultants training regional internal change agents to follow-up the training in the offices in their regions. Each office was required to incorporate the recommendations from the workshops into its D&I Action Plans and these had to be submitted to the group Diversity & Inclusion Strategy Unit.

The regional change agents then worked with their respective offices to enable them to implement their D&I Action Plans. Finally, the Diversity & Inclusion Strategy Unit monitored progress with the implementation of these plans on a three-monthly basis. Each office was required to submit information on its progress with its plans to enable the Strategy Unit to undertake this monitoring. It also had regular feedback from the regional internal change agents about successes and also problems and barriers that offices were encountering to progress. This enabled successes to be identified and publicised and shared on the intranet.

Progress was measured additionally through developing the organisation's annual employee engagement survey to obtain feedback on respondents' experiences of inclusion. The diversity demographics at the different levels of the organisation were also tracked.

The following outcomes were obtained:

> More creative input into problem solving through better cross-team relationships breaking down barriers between staff. This improved the collegiality of the organisation;
> Improved staff development through better cross-organisational learning between teams;
> Individuals bringing new ideas into their own jobs after experiencing other areas of work;
> Better individual understanding of cultural and religious sensitivities;
> Reduced risk of bullying, harassment, victimisation and discrimination;
> Better use of office space through physical barriers to inclusion being broken down.
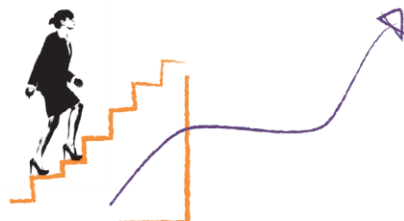
CASE STUDY 2

Another organisation had as its aims to: embrace inclusion and diversity to foster innovation and talent in the workplace and engage more effectively with customers and partners to provide more advanced business solutions in its worldwide marketplace; shift from a competitive, masculine, task-oriented culture to create a more inclusive, collaborative and truly meritocratic environment.

It placed the main intervention emphasis on its majority white male workforce. This group was targeted to ensure that they understood the D&I business case and adopted inclusive attitudes and behaviours, and this part of the intervention involved upfront training sessions for managers on inclusive engagement and on unconscious bias.

As in the earlier case discussed, research was conducted to determine how exclusion and unconscious bias played out in the workplace and in the interface with the market. Scenarios were then scripted to illustrate the findings from the research and portrayed by two actors in workshops delivered to managers. These again made an emotional impact and generated the management will to act to change the situation.

They committed to regularly talking to employees on walkabouts and in communications and briefings they led about the importance to the success of the business of D&I. They also endeavoured to act as role models through their inclusive behavioural example and challenged everyone to behave inclusively, both in internal and external interactions. A key message was that promotion would be dependent on demonstrating inclusive behaviour.

Training on how unconscious bias played out in engaging with customers and clients was delivered also to all of the organisation's sales managers. This training was followed by learning reinforcement activities, for example follow-up discussions with a trainer on the ways in which the sales managers were applying the learning, and setting dilemmas for the sales managers to respond to, publicising successes on the company intranet.

CASE STUDY 2 – RESULTS

The annual employee engagement survey was restructured to enable an inclusion index score to be generated to measure the engagement levels of different diversity strands. This demonstrated significant improvements in the extent to which employees experienced inclusive engagement. Finally, examples of new business being won that could be related to the intervention were tracked and some were significant. Also the company found that it was outperforming its competitors in recruiting women graduates.

SUMMARY OF THE STEPS THAT NEED TO BE TAKEN TO GENERATE INCLUSIVE ENGAGEMENT AND ADDRESS UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

The examples described in the previous section demonstrate that the following are key requirements for generating inclusive engagement and addressing unconscious bias:

It is critical that the most senior management reach both an intellectual and emotional understanding of the impact of exclusion and unconscious bias as it plays out for different diversity strands. This builds their determination to drive the necessary changes.

It is vital to invest in long-term strategic effort which will transform the prevailing white, masculine culture into one which is more inclusive of all types of diversity.

The most senior management must regularly offer compelling messages about the business importance of having inclusive engagement in the workplace and marketplace.

They must identify the behaviours that will drive inclusivity in their organisations and set a consistent example in them.

The workforce needs not only to understand how the organisation will be more successful if its people are more engaged through thinking and behaving inclusively; but also to be engaged in helping deliver the necessary changes, for example through project teams and task forces.

Organisations need to invest in training programmes to raise awareness of unconscious bias and the behaviours needed to engage inclusively with colleagues and customers, clients or service-users. This includes training in interactive behavioural effectiveness so that employees become better able to explore differing opinions, ideas and points of view and build on others' suggestions to generate innovative and successful solutions to complex business problems.

Training alone is insufficient to drive the necessary cultural shift. It needs to be reinforced by the leadership message and example and follow-up activities, including the use of internal change agents.

Progress needs to be measured in terms of both the 'softer' change in inclusive engagement, such as through measuring engagement indices for different diversity strands, and in terms of 'harder' business-related outcomes, for example retention of high potential under-represented employees, new business gains, customer satisfaction indices.