

## LEADERS AND PEOPLE MANAGERS

### Challenging Systemic Bias

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The way things work often take on a life of their own and become a system. This does not mean, however, that the manager is helpless and unable to take steps that can change the systems within which they have influence. Challenge systemic bias through individual action.

When every manager takes action in areas where they have influence, the ripple effect can spread across the organization. Maximum effects then happens when Leadership uses its power to encode antiracist, inclusive practices in the organization. Here are 4 key steps:

- **KNOW YOUR SYSTEMS**

Systems are made up of conscious and unconscious practices. Examples: The way you hire, onboard, reward, punish, forgive, select for professional development, and communicate to your people.

These all connect to form an invisible web of ‘the way we do things.’ This ‘way’ and the assumptions that feed it shape programs, policies, processes, and rules that on the surface seem neutral/fair. To the contrary, however, they can unwittingly privilege (give upper hand) to some while excluding others.

- **KNOW YOUR BIASES**

Recognize and acknowledge that we all have unconscious and unexamined biases that influence the way we react to people we see as ‘different’. Without realizing it, as a people manager you may be perpetuating these biases. Examples: your decision or recommendation on who gets hired, groomed, mentored; who gets the career-enhancing opportunities; and who is seen as having potential. Knowing your biases is a critical first step to creating a diverse, equitable, inclusive environment that encourages a sense of belonging for those who are disadvantaged by people management practices.

- **KNOW AND ALIGN YOUR VALUES**

Every Management table has a set of unwritten rules that easily translate into a culture where colleagues from non-dominant groups experience exclusion and disadvantage. Examples: the group 'forgives' the faux pas of someone it favors, while applying the full force of the rules to another person who, for example, is calling out inequity and unfairness; the group claims to advance people purely on merit, yet you know that favored candidates receive valuable nuggets of information that position them for success. Know where you stand on these is practice and how you can make your voice heard.

- **KNOW PRACTICAL STEPS TO TAKE**

1. **Re-align your motives.** Are you uncomfortable or ambivalent about certain types of diversity, even as you are comfortable with others? Examples: How do you really feel about someone from this generation being asked to lead this project? How do you feel about a parent with young children taking on this assignment? How comfortable are you with the staff person whose mental health or neurodivergence you now know?
2. **Re-align your thinking.** How in sync are you with the organization's vision as expressed in its commitment to being a diverse, equitable, inclusiveness place where people experience the reality of belonging? Example: If the organization says it is looking for the best talent, what is *your* definition of best? Is it based on an outdated model where talented people look, act, dress and think in a certain way?
3. **Re-align your actions.** They may be supporting a system of exclusion that inhibits your ability to get the best out of the people who report to you. People see far more than we think. They may not outright say, "When you say or do this it makes me feel inferior"; or "What you just said doesn't fit within the company's vision of inclusiveness". They may not say it, but they feel it. And they turn to people other than you for support. Even more concerning, they slowly fade away from meaningful engagement...while still at their desks.

It's what people experience through the actions you take that determines whether your department is living up to the organization's claim of inclusiveness.