Implicit Bias – And How to Make Good Leadership Decisions
by Mike Valentine, Partners International

Lipmen-Blumen, in her Pulitzer Prize nominated book, *The Connective Edge: Leading in an interdependent World* (1996), argues that to succeed in what she calls the "Connective Era" leadership must be redefined. She qualifies the challenge for today's leaders as being caught in this moment in history between two antithetical forces: interdependence and diversity, pushing in opposite directions and generating tensions that are transforming the context under which leaders must lead. Lipmen-Blumen refers to these tensions as the hallmark of the Connective Era.

The role of implicit (or unconscious) bias is one of the critical tensions faced in the increasingly dynamic and rapid-change environments of the Connective Era. As many are beginning to realize, bias in the workplace constitutes a significant – and often veiled – reality with powerful implications for organizational performance. It is a phenomenon fueled by globalization and increased diversity in the talent pool, alongside a growing awareness of the biases that create significant barriers to solid decision-making and effectively leveraging diverse talent, as well as inhibiting creativity and innovation. The result of increased awareness and newly urgent dialogue, implicit bias is capturing our attention and gaining recognition as a daunting challenge for complex organizational environments.

Although implicit bias has traditionally been associated with its negative impact on diverse organizational members, the role it plays in leadership thinking likely has much broader implications. Therefore, *and herein lies the punch line*, understanding how to mitigate its negative effects may position your firm for success. This can be achieved by developing capacity in the following three areas: 1) higher levels of decision quality; 2) enhanced creativity; and, not to be discounted, 3) overall organizational trust.

Although definitions vary slightly, implicit bias is associated with attitudes and stereotypes that affect behavior. They are "associations stored in memory"[1], drawn from life experiences[2] and often activated automatically **without** individual awareness[3]. These associations may even contradict an individual's declared beliefs or values[4]. Most importantly, they can influence both behavior and judgment[5]. Because individuals are generally not aware of their biases, leaders may respond in ways that are counter to their own self-perceived behaviors[6] and may unknowingly diminish their information processing and decision-making capacity. Consider the shortcuts taken when making a decision within a constrained time-frame. Do you

incorporate all of the information necesseary or rely on "gut instincts"? Do key organizational decisions include multiple perspectives or do they predominatly rely on a handful of experiences? The process begins with the following: once a problem or decision emerges implict bias is the first responder, drawing from past experiences – relevant or not – and seeking the fastest way to action (mental shortcuts). Studies consistently show that mental shortcuts, preferences based on prior experiences, and how leaders evaluate the risk/reward equation are places where bias can significantly influence leader thinking[7].

Savvy organizations know that success is increasingly dependent on leadership's ability to promote and enable a climate that encourages and embraces different perspectives; it is a premise supported by important research indicating that higher levels of inclusion positively influence engagement, teamwork, and innovation[8]. Furthermore, a critical and often overlooked connection between implicit bias and organizational success is the way bias influences routine decision-making and good judgment, a process at the heart of the organization's ability to deliver on its strategy and mission. One need only consider how many hundreds or thousands of decisions occur in pursuit of organizational aspirations, and the impact of poor decision-making quickly becomes apparent.

Key to indentifying the risk and charting a postivite path forward is understanding the landscape. Research has consistantly shown that the level of bias in an organization is related to how employees percieve the level of inclusiveness (i.e. perceptions of high bias equals perceptions of low inclusivity). This paper makes the argument that the effect of low inclusion levels on decision quality and judgement can have serious repercussions for organizations in the following three key process areas, all of which have powerful downstream impact:

1. Talent Management;

2. Managing complex change; and

3. Team development.

Challenges withstanding, the encouraging news is that implicit biases are measurable; more importantly, they have been shown to be pliable and can be unlearned[9] – news that reflects a highly promising finding in the battle against the repercussions of implicit bias. First and foremost, to combat this phenomenon we must be aware that we are ALL afflicted (this is normal). Regardless of our background, education, or position in the organization, we all have biases that we must attune to and accept in order to manage.

9 East 37TH Street   212.685.0400 PHONE   PARTNERS IN
New York, NY 10016   212.685.0545 FAX   HUMAN RESOURCES
                                                INTERNATIONAL, LLC

www.partners-international.com

Many scholars on the subject identify raising awareness as a critical first step in making change[10]. One method used to measure individual bias is the *Implicit Association Test* that is designed to measure relative strengths of associations[11]. Use of this instrument, coupled with Implicit Bias training, can improve awareness and serve as an organization's first step to identifying harmful behaviors and addressing them before damage is done and opportunities are missed.

Within our new world-order it is crucial that today's leaders have the awareness, training, and tools needed to mitigate the harmful impact that implicit biases can and do create. Like any behavior change, a commitment to developing awareness, identifying new behaviors and practices, providing support for change, and holding the organization "compassionately" accountable are critical strategies to leveraging organizational talent and finding success in the richly interconnected and increasingly complex work environments of the Connective Era.

References

[1] Amodio, D. M., & Mendoza, S. A. (2010). Implicit intergroup bias: Cognitive, affective, and motivational underpinnings. In B. Gawronski, & B. K. Payne, *Handbook of implicit social cognition* (pp. 353-374). New York: Guilford.

[2] Castelli, L., Zogmaister, C., & Tomelleri, S. (2009). The tranmission of racial attitudes within the family. *Developmental Psychology*, 586-591.

[3] Blair, I. V. (2002). The malleability of automatic stereotypes and prejudice. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 242-261.

[4] Beattie, G. (2013). *Our racist heart?: An exploration of unconscious prejudice in every day life.* London: Routledge. Greenwald, A. G., & Krieger, L. H. (2006). Implicit Bias: Scientific foundations. *California Law Review*, 945-967.

[5] Dobbins, F., Jung, J. (2011). Corporate board gender diversity and stock performance: The competence gap or institutional investor bias? *North Carolina Law Review 89 (3): 809-838*

[6] DeHouwer, J., Teige-Mocigemba, S., Spruyt, A., & Moore, A. (2009). Implicit measures: A normative analysis and review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 347-368.

[7] Lieberman, M. D., Rock, D., & Cox, C. L. (2014). *Breaking Bias.* NeuroLeadership Journal.

[8] Ross, H. J. (2011). *Reinventing diversity: transforming organizational community to strengthen people, purpose and performance.* New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

[9] Desgupta, N. (2013). Implicit attitudes and beliefs adapt to situations: A decade of research on the malleability on implicit prejudice, sterotypes and self concept. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 233-279.

[10] Ross, H. J. (2011). *Reinventing diversity: transforming organizational community to strengthen people, purpose and performance.* New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

[11] Greenwald, A. G., Poehlman, T. A., Uhlmann, E. L., & Banji, M. R. (2009). Understanding and using the Implicit Association Test: III Meta-analysis of predictive validity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 17-41. & Greenwald, A. G., McGee, D. E., & Schwartz, J. L. (1998). Measuring individual difference in implicit cognition: The Implicit Association Test. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1464-1480.

Mike Valentine is a Senior Consultant at Partners in HR International. Mike has over 30 years working with teams in a variety of settings and is currently conducting team-oriented research on behavior change as part of a PhD in Leadership and Change at Antioch University. Mike also has a Law degree from Temple University. He can be reached at: mvalentine@partners-international.com