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How to Overcome Unconscious Gender Bias? Make It a Priority

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Diana Bilimoria | Sep 05, 2017

Achieving benefits through organizational change is nothing new to manufacturers. Numerous companies in a wide range of industries have adopted process improvement programs such as Six Sigma, Lean Manufacturing, Total Quality Management and other initiatives – all with highly successful outcomes.

The key to success for all of these programs is full-scale commitment. It begins with top management, who must make it clear that these initiatives are necessary for the company to achieve its most important goals, and that commitment must cascade throughout every part of the organization to ensure every individual contributes to the effort. Piecemeal and ad hoc initiatives cannot do the job; rather organizational transformation occurs through systematic, multi-level, multi-dimensional, and

simultaneously enacted organizational innovations. These initiatives are targeted, well-resourced, and supported by executive sponsorship. They introduce a new mindset and language.

In many cases, these transformational efforts target ineffective processes and practices that are deep-seated within an organization's culture. Entrenched habits and widely held beliefs must be overcome so that better practices can be adopted.

Similarly, the subtle effects of unconscious gender bias are often unrecognized and deeply rooted in an organization's culture. To eliminate this unseen but pervasive bias, which can inhibit a company from achieving its full potential, the drive for gender equity must become institutionalized within the organization. Efforts to remove the barriers that prevent women from advancing in manufacturing must be truly transformational in nature.

Change Comes From the Top-Down, Bottom-Up and Middle-Out

Transformational change is most likely to occur when it is tied to clear strategic objectives, when individuals at all levels agree to work toward the same goals. This requires a reexamination of everyday practices, development of priorities, implementation of new programs and transparent communication at all levels.

In the case of gender bias, if organizations recognize it at all, it is typically addressed in vague terms and not as the systemic problem it is. However, the results of gender bias are very real – women find it harder to advance to positions of leadership in their chosen careers, and companies miss out on the contributions they could provide.

A full resolution of the problem needs to start with top management. Gender equality has to be tied to the organization's strategic mission and objectives. A clear mandate needs to come from the top. Eliminating this bias should be among the highest priorities. Once this mandate is clear, the desired changes must be incentivized at all levels. Each function and unit must be energized to enact the changes. Executive level leadership, resources, and the measurement of outcomes must be activated.

From the bottom-up, everyone becomes aware of the problem and works toward change. Ideas and experimentation are welcomed and sought from all levels, and the best of them will be implemented for lasting impact.

Simultaneously, from the middle-out, formal leadership and informal culture cascades transformational actions across the organization, and real changes in attitudes and actions begin to occur among teams, peer groups, partners and colleagues. Individuals and groups take ownership of the transformation. Successes are celebrated, small or

large. All are working together toward the same goal of bringing about change – and that's how unconscious biases can be eliminated. We know this process works with the right commitment, leadership, and empowerment.

Successful Examples in Higher Education

Businesses, usually manufacturing enterprises, often lead societal change. Yet this is one area in which business and the manufacturing sector can look to institutions of higher education as a guide.

Since 2001, the National Science Foundation has sponsored its NSF ADVANCE program to increase the participation and advancement of women in academic science and engineering careers, and to address structural impediments to the success of women faculty in the STEM fields. Over the last decade, NSF's ADVANCE program has become an increasingly widespread and influential national resource for reducing gender bias in academic science and engineering departments, with over 150 colleges and universities joining the effort. The program encourages and disseminates comprehensive, innovative and systemic initiatives to stimulate gender equity, diversity and inclusion.

In our book, *Gender Equity in Science and Engineering: Advancing Change in Higher* Eduction, researcher Xiangfen Liang and I studied 19 universities that were among the first ADVANCE grant awardees. These institutions were able to implement a dynamic portfolio of initiatives at the individual, unit, and institutional levels. The programs implemented by these universities fall into two broad categories:

--Pipeline initiatives to increase the inflow of women into the academic career path, better equip women to succeed on that path, and improve the institutional structures and processes related to recruitment, advancement and retention.

-- Cultural initiatives to transform the overall organizational climate, perceptions and awareness of gender equity issues and institute new programs such as training, family-friendly flexibility policies and targets to increase the number of women in leadership positions.

The results of these initiatives are encouraging. At the 19 universities, the number of women STEM faculty in the assistant and professor ranks increased significantly between baseline and final years. The average growth rate for women faculty in STEM during the award period at these institutions was 39.7% compared with a 3.5% growth rate for men. More women were advanced to leadership ranks, and workplaces were improved for everyone through policy and practice improvements.

These findings indicate that one-off actions cannot redress pervasive and deep-rooted unconscious gender bias in the academic STEM workplace. Only organization-wide, multi-dimensional, well-resourced and targeted interventions can move the needle in the participation, advancement and retention of women, particularly in leadership. Similar programs are likely to have comparable outcomes for manufacturing organizations that also take the initiative to rid themselves of unconscious gender bias in their structures, processes, work practices, attitudes and cultures.

Even deep-rooted practices can be changed, if we make it a priority.

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