

The Big Business of Unconscious Bias

Companies want to avoid racism, sexism and misgendering. Consultants are standing by.

By Nora Zelevansky

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Recently, a story circulated within the diversity, equity and inclusion industry (D.E.I.), one that somehow didn't go viral on social media: At an unnamed company, co-workers were taking their seats before a sensitivity training workshop began, when some white male employees entered as a group with targets pinned to their shirts — a sartorial statement about their anticipated persecution.

Apocryphal or not, “the story is powerful for two reasons,” said Laura Bowser, the board chair and former C.E.O. of TMI Consulting Inc., a D.E.I. strategy company in Richmond, Va., named for its two founders, but also the abbreviation meaning “too much information.” “One, it shows that there is still an utter lack of empathy and understanding about privilege and power dynamics. Second, it demonstrates how many diversity and inclusion trainings in the past have failed.”

Of late, the D.E.I. (also known as D & I) industry is booming, creating new career paths and roles. Institutions and businesses are trying to correct power imbalances, which means a growing need for experts who can help address and define issues like unconscious bias.

“I've seen a difference in people's level of engagement and desire to stretch themselves since the 2016 election,” said Michelle Kim, the C.E.O. and co-founder of Awaken, an experiential D.E.I. workshop company in Oakland, Calif., whose program is popular with the tech industry. “We're seeing employees demanding action, not just lip service.”

Awaken's sessions, taught over the course of months, combine large group activities, self-reflection and small group conversations, and focus on themes like exploring identities, overcoming microaggressions, thoughtful ally-ship and, most recently, inclusive language.

According to data from Indeed, a job-search engine, D.E.I.-related postings were up more than 25 percent from August 2018 to August 2019.

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“We're receiving more organic calls now,” said Kenneth L. Johnson, the president and D.E.I. recruiter for East Coast Executives, a recruitment firm in New York City. “Organizations are more aware — and there's accountability — about having diversity.”

From Hugs to Likes

The old way of approaching these issues with perfunctory, so-called sensitivity training is no longer acceptable. Today, no one is going to “hug it out” after a single lecture about embracing difference.

According to a 2016 report from the Harvard Business Review, traditional sensitivity training can be ineffectual and can breed resentment. Even the term itself has fallen out of favor.

“Sensitivity training became popular in the ’80s and ’90s,” Ms. Bowser said. “It focuses on the negative: what not to do or say. But one-off training doesn’t shift culture in the direction we want to see it go: building empathy.” Inclusion is an ongoing process. Pay equity, language, marketing and hiring practices are all now subject to scrutiny.

Even at a well-intentioned company that espouses progressive values, there will inevitably be slips of the tongue and insensitive emails: the wrong pronoun, an outdated term, an assumption about how a person identifies him, her or themselves. The glossary of appropriate terminology and inclusive acronyms and abbreviations is constantly evolving.

“Our world is changing so fast and language is changing so fast, it’s counterproductive to expect perfection,” said Jennifer Brown, the founder and C.E.O. of Jennifer Brown Consulting and the author of a new book, “How to Be an Inclusive Leader.” (She also hosts a podcast, “The Will to Change.”)

Missteps along the way are “to be expected,” she said, “because it signals that we are building new capabilities. People are showing courage by getting comfortable with being uncomfortable.”

Even the experts are learning on the job. While running a recent panel, Ms. Brown asked the participants to indicate their preferred pronouns when they introduced themselves.

She forgot to say her own, which, in turn, tripped up audience members, who fell back on expressions like “you guys” for fear of getting it wrong. “I do this for a living and am literally learning in real time, in front of audiences,” she said.

Ms. Bowser also recalled a slip-up: She was at a conference with a woman (post-gender transition) whom she had originally met as a man. In conversation with this person and others, Ms. Bowser accidentally referred to her as he instead of she. The D.E.I. expert was mortified and later sent an apology email.

“Her response was very gracious,” Ms. Bowser said. “She said, ‘You’ve known both of my identities. It means a lot to me that you’re trying.’”

“There’s an inclination to pretend it didn’t happen and hope someone didn’t hear — but they heard,” she added. “Own it and apologize.”

For many younger people, gender fluidity and the pronouns that go with it are automatic, but not so for those who grew up with just two choices, neither plural. “For millennials, the conversation is about having grace, recognizing that this is a shift for other people,” Ms. Bowser said. “For older generations, it’s about opening their minds a bit.”

Millennials' expectation of inclusion is part of what is driving C.E.O.s and directors to bring in D.E.I. consultants. That generation will make up 75 percent of the work force by 2025, according to Brookings, the nonprofit public policy organization.

"The younger generation expects the company to be walking the walk to retain and attract the best talent," Ms. Brown said. "If they can't see diversity in leadership, they're likely to struggle to envision their own trajectory and, eventually, leave."

According to McKinsey & Company, the consultancy, businesses in the top quartile for racial and ethnic diversity are more likely to be more successful financially; executive teams with gender diversity are 21 percent more likely to outperform their peers.

But it's also important for public relations and brand identity. "D & I has transformed from a compliance function to a cultural transformation accelerator for companies who want to establish themselves as relevant," said Lindsay-Rae McIntyre, the chief diversity officer at Microsoft.

The company strives to generate inclusion with initiatives like featuring personal stories from employees on Instagram and selling rainbow Pride laptop skin. "It's become an integrative piece of how companies engage in their broader ecosystem," she said.

A New Profession

How does one break into the D.E.I. field? Some universities, including Cornell, Georgetown and Yale, are beginning to offer certificate programs and online courses on the subject.

For now, industry leaders have a range of backgrounds: social justice, sales, marketing, political activism, minority studies, writing and more. Some, according to Ms. Bowser, just have a natural gift for navigating difficult conversations or defusing tension in a room.

Whether consultants, recruiters, in-house D.E.I. executives, workshop leaders or manuscript readers in publishing, the positions demand emotional intelligence. Often, people enter the profession after personal experiences with prejudice at school or in the workplace.

"I identify as a member of the L.G.B.T.+ community and a woman business leader," said Ms. Brown, whose company originally focused on more general leadership training. "I realized this was an important cause to support and a niche with growth potential."

The job can be challenging, she said: "People only sign up because their passion is so deep that they want to fix the world."

That is true for Nat Razi, one of the early sensitivity readers (now known as "authenticity readers") for the publishing industry, a job that arose out of We Need More Diverse Books, a 2014 hashtag-turned-movement.

Authenticity readers — most commonly used for young-adult manuscripts — scan for bias about identities and conditions they share, including ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, disabilities, PTSD, depression and more.

This corner of the new diversity industry also has drawn detractors. The growing prevalence of this oversight practice in the publishing world has spurred cries of “censorship” and arguments that the process can be detrimental to the books themselves.

Others began to feel that the authenticity readers themselves were being used as shields against potential attacks and excuses for appropriation instead of being hired because of a genuine desire to get it right.

Justina Ireland, a writer who once maintained the primary Writing in the Margins Sensitivity Reader database, a list of authenticity readers and their specialties, stepped away in early 2018, writing in an open letter that the readers were being exploited and scapegoated instead of empowered.

Ms. Razi has found the work difficult but rewarding. “When I was a kid, the books I read with Indian protagonists were racist and told me that I should be looking up to white people,” she said. “Books with queer protagonists told me that I was going to die. I can at least do my best to ensure that kids are going to see better representation.”

Sometimes consultancies like Ms. Brown’s and Ms. Bowser’s are called in, like cleanup crews, after scandals and bad publicity. But businesses are obviously trying to help avoid these in the first place, as well as keep up company morale.

The investment can be considerable. According to Ms. Bowser, diversity support can cost \$25,000 to \$450,000 a year, depending on the client’s needs. Businesses also have to factor in the time employees spend away from their desks during training.

Tech, and Talk

The process can take anywhere from three months to a few years. Fortune 500 companies with existing diversity departments may only need educational refreshers, while companies starting from scratch may require thorough examinations of mission statements, employee reviews, airing of past grievances and more.

Consultants talk to employees about their day-to-day experiences, redline handbooks and intervene with coaching and conflict resolution.

Despite, or perhaps because of, Silicon Valley’s reputation for diversity gaps, tech tools are blooming to help. TMI’s founder, Tiffany Jana, is developing Loom, an online assessment and reporting platform that looks at an organization’s culture and identifies inclusion gaps.

Currently, Textio software can scan thousands of documents for language bias. “This new tech is going to create a leap in consciousness,” Ms. Brown said. “Maybe you’re a father with daughters and you say, ‘Of course, women here feel there’s equal opportunity and no pay gap!’ The tech may find information to the contrary.” Data forces people to face facts.

But sometimes only the human touch will do, as Eve Campan, a human resources site manager for Porex, a large filtration company, can attest. Just before she was hired, a group of female executives — miffed by their heavily white and male leadership — created a proposal, demanding a women’s resource group, mother’s room and more flexible hours.

Ms. Campan hired TMI Consulting to help “wrap people’s minds around the idea of unconscious bias,” she said. “If you’re not proactive, your culture will define itself.”

At the first D.E.I. seminar, she was doubtful about the corporate jargon, and more than one employee scoffed that the whole thing was unnecessary. But, after each additional workshop, she began walking the floor of the office, talking to people about their reactions. Each time, she said, more of the original dissenters came around.

According to Ms. Bowser, the key is to make everyone, from assistants to C.E.O.s, feel as if they are part of the conversation. “If you’re not making people aware and holding them responsible at the upper levels of your organization, then you don’t have a chance,” Mr. Johnson said.

In some cases, the term “diversity” itself may need to be redefined, so that it encompasses not only race, gender, religion and sexual orientation, but also veterans, people with disabilities, ageism, economic disparity, past trauma and more.

“The question isn’t about whether it’s effective,” Ms. Kim said. “It’s about how to make it effective.”

After all, everyone brings their own complex back story to the table, and offenses can go both ways. Melissa Roth, a Jewish writer recalled an incident that occurred in a fiction writing class in Los Angeles, when she used the word “gypped” and a white woman in class reprimanded her.

“I got called out for being offensive to Gypsies,” she said, “by someone who couldn’t pronounce the word ‘chutzpah.’”

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