



# Asleep in the Fire

## The Dangers of Unconscious Bias Training

**U**nconscious Bias training. Is it the silver bullet, or are we just shooting blanks in our quest for an inclusive workplace?

Unconscious Bias is an intangible state of mind—a cerebral concept and therefore, not actionable. One cannot “do” an unconscious bias. As long as we remain focused on the concept side of the equation we cannot effect change. It is entirely the action side of the equation that generates results.

This article reveals the solution and the tools to bridge the gap between concept and action.

Raising our awareness through unconscious bias training can fool us into thinking we’ve made great progress in managing it. But there is a risk. Many people walk away from these experiences feeling better informed. They become comfortable having learned the root cause of the problems they perpetuate or experience. But these “aha” moments are simply not good enough.

There is a dangerous self-deception in thinking this knowledge makes us an active part of the solution.

Simply being informed and made aware does not make us equipped to influence change. No more than knowing about and talking about global-

warming will result in fewer icebergs melting this week.

When we look at the definition of unconscious bias a notable paradox emerges;

**Unconscious Bias:** *The positions we hold about others that are influenced through past experiences forming filters that cause conclusions to be reached, about groups or ethnicities, by ways other than through active thought or reasoning.*

The paradox is revealed in three key words: “positions” “filters” and “conclusions”—after all, no one can “do” a position, filter, or a conclusion. These are entirely limited to cerebral

thoughts and feelings. When we act on those thoughts and feelings and convert them into action, they become MicroInequities.

The only way for organizations to effectively manage unconscious bias is learning how to manage the subtle MicroMessages we send

that reveal them. Typically, MicroInequities.

These MicroMessages, whether they come in the form of destructive MicroInequities, or developmental MicroAdvantages, function as the core of how unconscious bias is manifested and how workplace inclusion is ultimately achieved.

Many organizations tend to focus primarily on educating their staff on the eye-opening world



*“Unconscious bias is a critical point of introspection, but the question remains what specifically are we expected to do about it?”*

of unconscious bias. This often leaves attendees knowledgeable but without the skill to effect change.

There are countless examples of people who leave unconscious bias training experiences with a blissful “aha” cloud of newfound awareness.

They emerge enlightened and enthusiastic but ill-equipped to personally drive change. Why is this?

**T**here is great danger in focusing on Unconscious Bias instead of directing our attention to MicroInequities, when it is entirely through our micromessages that we can take specific action to fix it.

Our lack of awareness of how to manage our MicroMessages often leaves us... asleep in the fire.

There are countless data points, articles and training programs that uncover a long history of unconscious bias in the workplace. These spend a disproportionate focus on the causes and impact. They tell us about our failures and serve up an abundance of data showing disparate treatment to certain groups based on factors and behaviors of which we were unaware.

The data focuses on the “what,” or condition, of the problem instead of identifying the



*Unconscious Bias: The positions we hold about others that are influenced through past experiences forming filters that cause conclusions to be reached, about groups or ethnicities, by ways other than through active thought or reasoning.*

specific process by which we can personally take action to correct it.

For example, learning that 60% of American CEOs are over six feet tall, yet less than 15%

of American men are over that height is an interesting and revealing statistic—but, what do we DO about it?

Data revealing that overweight people are given lower performance appraisal ratings

provides another “Aha” moment and may be enlightening, but again, offers no actionable solution.

Discovering that candidates with ethnic sounding names receive a lower percentage of callbacks for an interview is eye opening information that heightens awareness but the question remains, what specifically are we expected to do about it?

**L**et’s face it, no one is expected to interview all short people, or give high performance ratings to those who are overweight. Spending time learning about these and countless other ways that our unconscious biases are manifested is introspective, analytical and even interesting.

Often, a great amount of training time and resources are allocated to build this awareness. Participants are thrilled at having achieved newfound knowledge of the impact of unconscious bias and are left puzzled about what day-to-day actions to take to remediate the condition.

The traditional training approach places the focus on those unfortunate “others”—not me—who are affected by unconscious bias. This creates a subtle sense of immunity and false perception of not being a potential beneficiary, if one happens to fall outside those labels.

In short order, people find themselves frustrated and wondering how to implement change. This frustration ultimately causes many of them to view the experience as yet another “warm and fuzzy, touchy feely” expenditure of time.

In a survey conducted of mid-level managers for a New Jersey based pharmaceutical company, a series of questions were asked about their participation in unconscious bias training.

The results were eye-opening. Two of the survey questions were; (1) Do you feel you have a clear understanding of Unconscious Bias? (2) Do you understand what you can do to remedy the condition?”

73% of survey respondents indicated they had a clear understanding of unconscious bias. Remarkably, 92% of the respondents could not identify, specifically, what they could do to address it.

In this case, the “bullet” designed to target unconscious bias has become a blank.

What it looks like and why we behave poorly is simply not as valuable as building knowledge and skill on how to manifest the desired change through our MicroMessages.

**73%** of respondents had an understanding of *Unconscious Bias*.

**92%** of those respondents did not know what to do to address it.



To truly move the needle forward, the workplace must focus on managing the controllable elements that alter the impact of our unconscious biases; the MicroMessages, MicroInequities and MicroAdvantages we send.

Insight Education Systems’ seminar, MicroMessaging: Managing Unconscious Bias, shifts the focus away from awareness and entirely on the actionable side of the equation—the tangible and manageable components of unconscious bias.

Our approach focuses on building the skills of MicroMessaging to drive change and provides the tools to sustain them.

Move from concept to action. Learn how to convert awareness of unconscious bias into specific actions that can be applied to affect measurable behavior change. Discover the ways it has been applied for over 300 companies, across 35 countries, globally.

**Give us a call: 973-509-2911**

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