



Confronting a Culture of Bias

by Dev Shields | Jan 31, 2018

Canadian Club Toronto was proud to welcome the “Learning to Lead Without Bias” panel on January 17, 2018, featuring Renee Bazile-Jones (Canadian Centre for Diversity & Inclusion), Scott Campbell (Blue Dot Strategy) and Lisa Mattam (Sahajan & The Mattam Group), moderated by David Scandiffio (CIBC Asset Management).

Club Vice-President Pam Warren took the stage to introduce the panelists and discussion. She defined bias by citing the Ontario Human Rights Commission: a predisposition, prejudice or generalization about persons based on personal characteristics or stereotypes. Unconscious bias is the manifestation of past experiences, learnings and thoughts that shape our thinking, she continued. Though we may not recognize our biases, they ultimately play a role in our decision making and impact both our personal and professional lives.

Scandiffio noted that it’s not hard to see blatant equity issues in society. Unconscious bias starts with fairness and becomes a business issue, he said. He acknowledged the way Toronto and Canada are perceived as “multicultural and open” but leave much to be desired when looking at diversity in corporate roles. When it came to representation in the workplace, Scandiffio cited two reports that illustrated these major gaps: a 2017 Osler report revealed that women hold 16% of executive positions at TSX listed firms, and 30% of firms don’t have any females on their boards at all. Meanwhile, a 2017 Ryerson report disclosed that only 9% of executive positions at TSX listed firms are held by visible minorities, and 90% of these corporate boards don’t have a single visible minority. It’s clear there’s a problem, he said, “...and we need to have more discussion about things that aren’t conscious to us.”

Scandiffio began by asking Campbell what neuroscience tells us about our biases. Simply, it’s something we must live with, Campbell replied. People tend to operate on an unconscious level for most of the day, and our brain is constantly scanning for threats. Because of the way that our brains have evolved, we are more likely to notice negatives or differences than positives or similarities. Additionally, all humans operate with an affinity bias which bonds us closer to people with similar characteristics, even small things like attending the same school, Campbell explained. This evolution took place for good reasons, but in contemporary society “causes a lot of pain and unnecessary exclusion.” This doesn’t make us inherently

bad people, but it's important to recognize that anyone who has a brain holds biases, even if their conscious orientations are positive, he concluded.

Mattam was then asked about the risks associated with understanding these biases, with Scandiffio emphasizing that organizations need to be intentional when attempting to disrupt bias in their workplaces. Mattam found herself being the champion for diversity in her work environments because of her lived experiences and looked forward to making a tangible difference when she started a business of her own. After 10 years, she found that things hadn't progressed nearly as much as she thought they had. The issue, she specified, was that training isn't comprehensive enough. Organizations treat it as a one-time check box, without instating a long term strategy and commitment to diversity and inclusion. Executives and employees need to be on board by holding themselves accountable, but also by formulating a plan that can be assessed routinely, she suggested. "It's not a sprint, it's a marathon."

Bazile-Jones was asked for her take on where we are in terms of progress, and what needs to be done to keep the pace. In short, Bazile-Jones says that we're not where we need to be. An analysis of organizations at the Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion framed the reason we focus on unconscious bias is to "let ourselves off the hook." Not wanting to believe that we're biased beings, we blame our lack of awareness on the decisions we make. She suggested that paying attention to the places we're consuming media from is a first step. Who are your influences? And once we acknowledge the bias across different reporting outlets, "Do we as a society actually object?" she asked. Moving forward, organizations need to separate representation and actual diversity, and abandon the idea that the numbers game equals inclusion, Bazile-Jones affirmed.

Having a woman or a person of colour on an executive team doesn't necessarily mean new perspectives, Scandiffio said. "What does practicality mean? What have you seen in organizations that has been most effective...or not?"

Mattam shared what she had seen PepsiCo employ in order to represent the way the Canadian landscape had changed. Every person who managed people was to include diversity and inclusion in their metrics and was made to demonstrate how they were fostering these programs in their teams. This ensured that it didn't fall into the category of "side project" or "goal" and instead was able to be analyzed like any other aspect of the manager's job. It allowed for long term accountability and also showed employees that it was as important as any other facet of the business, Mattam said. Another thing that we need to be cognizant of in the hiring process, is the difference between interviews and chats, she said. She explained: "Chats are great, but we all have a tendency to like people like us." The lack of structure means that certain people are being brought in and others are being left out because they may not fit in that particular chat, she said. Her challenge to organizations moving

forward is to establish hiring systems that move people out of “this feels really good”, as Mattam put it.

Campbell shared a story of an auto company that implemented a “Call It When You See It” policy, encouraging all employees to have candid conversations about inappropriate or damaging behaviour and comments. He recommends trying to mitigate the impact of bias in processes and structures rather than trying to remove it from people. It’s not an HR issue, it’s a leadership issue, he affirmed.

Bazile-Jones’s belief is that “...as leaders, we often don’t know what we don’t know”. Leaders need to be putting forth an effort to truly understand what is going on in their organization, and part of that is attaining “deep dive demographics”. Collecting factual information about the way your business and the way certain people experience it will allow you to implement a strategy to best address biases in the workplace, she said. Constant self-assessment and recognizing that we all hold biases will “...create high-calibre environments where people can be their genuine selves.” she added.

Taking one question from the audience before wrapping up, Scandiffio asked the panelists how they think the “Weinstein-era” will affect bias in the workplace. “It’s very upsetting and disruptive. Is it a change agent?” Scandiffio asked.

Bazile-Jones, who performs workplace harassment investigations, said she got a lot of phone calls after the Weinstein story broke. To begin, she asked anyone in the room who had ever been sexually harassed in the workplace to raise their hands, and an overwhelming majority of the women in the room (if not all of them) did so. She said the idea that any organizations or leaders are unaware of the gravity of the problem is shocking, but less so for her as she’s been working in this space for 30 years. We can’t allow offenders to stay in their positions just because they are rainmakers, she warned. If leaders aren’t willing to address these issues, we can forget about inclusive organizations. “This is where real leadership comes into play.”

Mattam regularly meets with a group of women in business for support, she explained. After the outpouring of women coming forward, they met for dinner and found they didn’t have enough time in the evening for everyone to share their experiences. Leaders need to be willing to listen and take action, as well as navigate through murky issues, she affirmed. “We have beautiful values on the wall and we stand up for credos we live by, but when push comes to shove, we’re not necessarily willing to action them. There’s a limit.” The learned experience of women in general is that this harassment may just be a part of working and it’s not worth talking about, Mattam said. But leaders must be clear and firm in their values. After the US election, she shared, she was comfortable saying she was depressed because it felt as though a large group of people chose issues of economy or infrastructure over human rights. It’s imperative that we remember that these conversations are happening in Canada, just as they are south of the border, she said.

Executive Director Colleen Kennedy then took the stage to thank the panel and deliver closing remarks. Being responsible business leaders means being mindful, she said. "Given the rich diversity of our populations, leaders cannot afford to ignore this issue any longer."

In 2018, organizations that only speak to diversity and inclusion with empty promises and buzzwords will soon find themselves in trouble, if they haven't already. Of course there is untapped human potential that comes along with instituting strong diversity protocols and processes, but it needs to be about more than capital. Without a genuine personal investment in combatting our unconscious and conscious biases, our work environments will not reap the benefits. To echo Lisa Mattam, it should not be the job of the marginalized to appeal to those with power. The solution starts with leaders who are willing to listen, and it continues with the willingness to call out others on the imbalances they make possible. Commit to constantly unlearning harmful structures and compensate people fairly for their labour. Learning to lead without bias is by no means an easy or quick task, but one that is vital to ensure continued success for organizations in all facets.

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