

THE *Leadership Problem* OF INEQUITY



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2020 was a year that delivered 20/20 hindsight. Leaders navigated the challenges of COVID-19, racial tension and political instability simultaneously. Lives lost to disease, an economic downturn and protests dominated our news feeds. At the precipice of the new year, our 2020 challenges seem to have intensified. Polarization could cause the workplace to become more divisive.

In this business climate, even the prospect of inequity is untenable. Inequity impacts employee morale, customer sentiment and organizational performance. In addition to swelling calls to reduce disparities, barriers like unconscious bias, ignorance, apathy and fear present obstacles to a harmonious community landscape.

Part of the solution rests in objective leadership frameworks (OLFs). These are structural approaches leaders can apply to mitigate the effects of bias and reduce systemic inequities. OLFs provide leaders with tools to improve their efficacy in leading today's workforce. Developing leaders through the use of OLFs is a practical pathway to pursue inclusive, sustained organizational success. Let's take a moment to assess OLFs' role in supporting diversity and inclusion initiatives, increasing leadership efficiency, and creating an organizational culture anchored in equitable leadership practices.

INEQUITY AND UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

Often, inequity is the outcome of being treated unjustly or unfairly. If an individual experiences behavior inconsistent with what is morally fair or that departs from established rules and generally accepted beliefs of equality and justice, they feel unjustly treated. It's important to note that inequity isn't based only on being treated unjustly; the perception alone result in feelings of being unfairly treated.

While most leaders try to behave equitably by managing conscious bias, it's the unconscious biases that undermine well-meaning efforts. Unconscious biases are oblivious tendencies, blind propensities, unknowing favoritism, negligent partiality,

unsuspecting leanings or inattentive inclinations. Unconscious bias is the presence of unfairness, occurring underneath conscious thought and rendering well-meaning conscious efforts less effective.

THE BUSINESS AND SOCIAL IMPACT OF UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

In the workplace, unconscious bias may cause employees to question their value to the company or the magnitude of their contribution – resulting in low morale and disengagement, increased turnover, and decreased productivity and organizational competitiveness. The types of unconscious biases that impact equitable leadership in today's workplace include availability, in-group, [Simmelweis reflex](#), observer-expectancy, confirmation, conformity, affinity, framing effect, status quo and group attribution. These cognitive biases are dangerous to organizational performance because they can:

- ▶ Weaken the ability and willingness to create value.
- ▶ Increase the risk and likelihood of value erosion.
- ▶ Diminish the character and culture of the organization.
- ▶ Weaken the corporate brand.
- ▶ Stifle opportunities to be authentic.

OBJECTIVE LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORKS AS A SOLUTION

Inequitable leadership not only hurts the corporate entity but also negatively impacts relationships with customers, employees, managers, peers, suppliers and partners. So, what's an antidote for unconscious bias in the workplace? It's making the unconscious conscious by replacing leadership partiality with leadership objectivity. As an innovation coach, I work with startups on customer adoption for new technologies and services. I developed a model that I believe is useful in assisting an organization in innovating its equitable leadership

efforts. Let's explore this four-phased approach of awareness, adjustment, abandonment and authenticity.

AWARENESS

The first phase is awareness. This phase aims to validate that an unconscious bias exists and is a threat to the organization. Leaders and employees believe in the merits of equity, but – until we experience evidence to the contrary – most people are reticent toward prescriptive action. As leaders, we must identify specific examples of inequity and use data to communicate the problem, its prevalence and its impact. Awareness of these conditions can strengthen belief in and commitment to necessary adjustments.

The Georgia State University (GSU) story of "[Eliminating Equity Gaps Through Data and Institutional Change](#)" by Timothy M. Renick, Ph.D., is an exemplary story of creating awareness to promote action. As the title suggests, his research details how GSU explored the factors negatively impacting graduation rates based on race, ethnicity and socioeconomic factors. After becoming aware, they took action and graduation rates improved by over 30%.

ADJUSTMENT

The second phase is adjustment. Once we become aware, we can adjust. This phase aims to change behavior through deliberate thinking and objective action. In his book "Thinking, Fast and Slow," Daniel Kahneman defines system 1 and system 2 thinking. The first "operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control," and the second "allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it, including complex computations."

Unconscious biases rely on less rigorous, preprogrammed mindsets that lead to inattentive decision-making. By employing OLFs (see sidebar),

leaders can become less reactive, more responsive and increasingly equitable in their decision-making.

ABANDONMENT

The third phase is abandonment. In approaching innovation, authors W. Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne discuss the Eliminate-Reduce-Raise-Create (ERRC) Grid in their book, "Blue Ocean Strategy." When it comes to unconscious biases, it's not enough to merely reduce some behaviors; we must eliminate them (e.g., racial profiling, sexual harassment, bullying, etc.).

The goal of this phase is to lay the foundation for sustained organizational success by abandoning biased behavior. Economist Joseph Schumpeter described creative destruction as innovating by destroying existing processes to make way for new creations. Failure to do so may result in catastrophe. We often innovate our approaches to technology and business processes, but how often do we apply those approaches to our people development methods?

Through abandonment, we leverage OLFs to create and support a shared organizational vision. Division is often a byproduct of no vision. A shared vision focuses our attention, consolidates group effort and recasts our differences as differentiated capabilities that help us achieve a common goal. We also create credible connections. Mutual dependence in pursuit of a shared goal helps establish a credible connection.

According to contact theory, contact between two groups can promote tolerance and acceptance, as long as there is equal status and common goals. Consider military training as an example. Basic training begins with a reprioritization of individuality and collective goals. Social, economic and cultural differences are deprioritized for a shared vision of success, resulting in a shared sense of equivalency. Recruits

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learn the value of mutual dependency as indoctrination into a new community leads to a sense of unity.

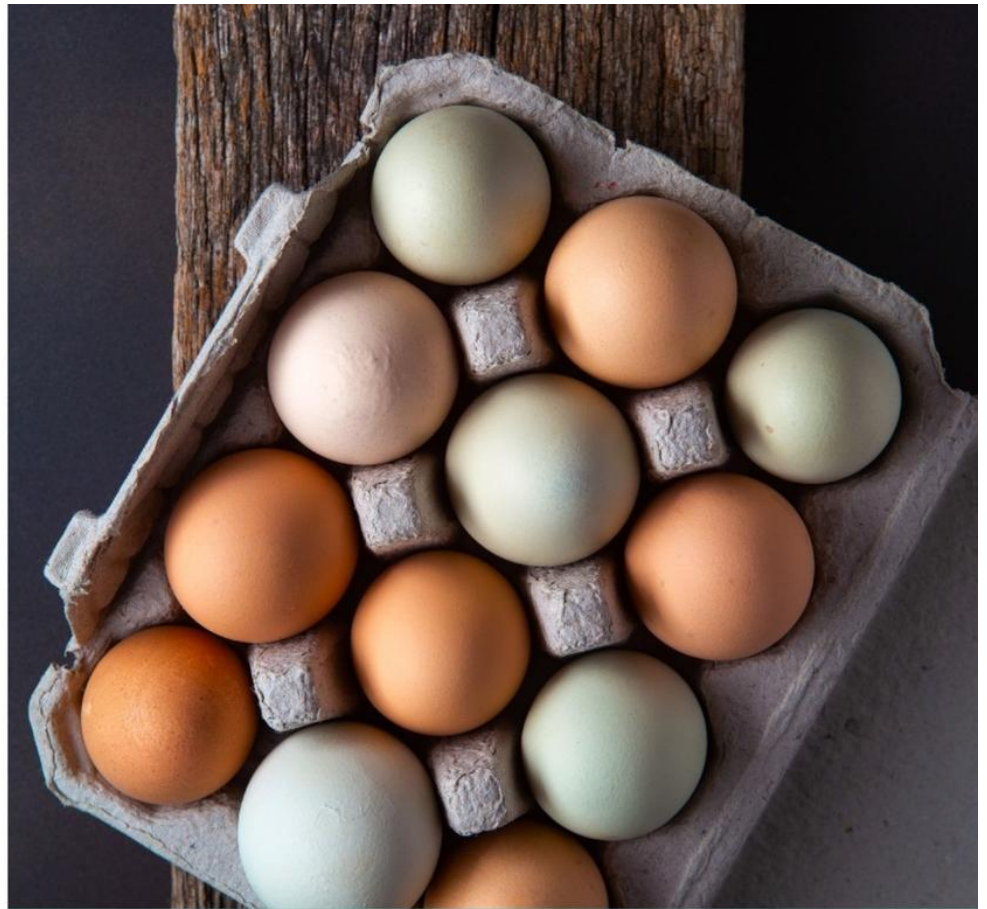
AUTHENTICITY

The word authentic means “true to one’s own personality, spirit or character.” In this final phase, the continued reduction of unconscious bias helps create a culture of mutual respect. The goal of the authenticity phase is to grow beyond tolerance to appreciation. The practical steps to authenticity begin with agreement and alignment on the fact that people have the right to differing opinions.

Salespeople pursue this progression by seeking the smallest point of agreement with a prospect, then capitalizing on the momentum imbedded in that unity. Having honest dialogue from that point forward allows for disagreement and challenging discussion. Debate and conflict can be productive when conducted with honesty and respect. Moreover, calling attention to shared success conveys the importance of winning as a team as opposed to a collection of randomly assembled individuals. Lastly, public praise can positively affect the recipient, the team and the praise giver. These actions can help in building a corporate culture that demonstrably values individuals, the teams they work with and the institutions they serve.

If nothing else, 2021 provides all of us with not only an opportunity to recover from the myriad of disruptions we endured in 2020 but also to usher in a renaissance of sorts. Perhaps the key is not as much about developing new tools to help us enhance our objectivity and transform environments defined by inequity as it is about figuring out how to use existing tools on a far more diligent, strategic and inclusive journey from heightened awareness to progressive authenticity. ☺

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STEPS FOR USING AN OLF

- 1 Identify OLFs consistent with the corporate culture.** OLFs are approaches to leading and decision-making that enable leaders to lead equitably. A nonexhaustive list of OLFs includes the army leadership model, situational leadership®, DISC®, emotional intelligence and more. Generally, OLFs are intended to improve individual effectiveness, enhance organizational performance and develop leaders.
- 2 Leverage OLFs to adjust organizational behavior by reducing unconscious bias.** Conscious efforts to consistently align decision-making with published corporate values reinforce those values while demonstrating equitable leadership. Leaders should refer to the corporate OLFs adopted by the culture when making decisions.
- 3 Evaluate the effectiveness of OLFs in enabling equitable leadership practices.** In some cases, leaders may find existing corporate OLFs to be inequitable and in need of adjustment.