Mitigating Implicit Bias in Interviewing

Implicit Bias and Stereotype Threat

“A quarter century ago, most psychologists believed that human behavior was primarily guided by conscious thoughts and feelings. Nowadays the majority will readily agree that much of human judgment and behavior is produced with little conscious thought.”

Mahzarin R. Banaji & Anthony G. Greenwald

Despite our best intentions, we all carry the biases we have been socialized to believe about different racialized groups, genders, people with disabilities, the elderly, and many others. Throughout the hiring process you will be most successful in diversifying staff if you talk explicitly about what might be going on implicitly.

Because bias is so pervasive, it also can also influence the behavior of candidates applying for a position. The internalization of stereotypes about one’s own group and resulting poor performance has been explored by Claude Steele’s and other’s research on stereotype threat. So, for example, a person who been stereotyped, such as a woman not being good at math, will do worse on a math test because she is using brain power to try to disprove the stereotype. Again, a person doesn’t have to consciously believe the stereotype about themselves, but it will show up in high-stakes situations, such as applying for a job. Therefore, it is important for the interview team to take into account both their unconscious biases about applicants as well as the ways applicants’ performances might be influenced by stereotype threat.

DEVELOPING A CULTURALLY COMPETENT INTERVIEW COMMITTEE

Before going into an interview, it is important to prepare a culturally responsive interview team. Consider how you will make sure to have diverse perspectives, and provide training for those doing the interviewing.

1. Have a Foundational Level of Cultural Competence: Ensure interviewers have at least a foundational level of cultural competence, bring an understanding of the impact of institutional privilege on candidate competencies, and know the difference between equity and equality.

   • Be aware of your assumptions, biases, attitudes and beliefs about the culture of the candidate you are interviewing. Increase exposure to stigmatized groups and actively pursue counters to stereotypes. Practice thinking about messages or people that counter stereotypical roles.

   • Take an Implicit Association Test on-line to acknowledge your own biases prior to screening or interviewing applicants. https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/
• Have some knowledge of the cultural norms, values and beliefs of the candidates being interviewed to avoid Eurocentric norming. For example many cultures value the cohesion of the group over individual accomplishments. Candidates may not “sell” themselves in the way dominant culture dictates.
• Have some basic understanding of communication styles of engaging diverse groups.
• Make an intentional effort to challenge yourself to deepen grow in the above mentioned areas. Don’t rely on your organization to provide you with all the professional development you will need to understand the ways in which we’ve been socialized.
• Engage in mental perspective taking. Ask questions that help you to understand experiences that are different from your own.

2. **Have a Diverse Committee:** Have diverse voices and representation on the interview committee to increase the variety of perspectives and experiences.
   • People on the interview committee from different levels of the organization with diverse backgrounds can help to mitigate the unconscious bias of one person holding all the decision making power.
   • Having someone of a similar racial background or same gender as the candidates on the committee whenever possible, even one other person reduces the threat of representing all people from a stigmatized group. Candidates of color also report feeling more comfortable when the committee is racially diverse.

3. **Establish Agreements:** It’s important that you are all on the same page with how you will engage one another as a committee and what you believe about systemic racism. Your beliefs about this work will determine your commitment and your approach. Creating a culture of equity and inclusion requires that you do some things differently than how you have in the past. It won’t be easy but by establishing agreements and norms together it will help you stay committed when the going gets tough.
   • Establish ground rules or norms for your committee to insure equal participation in discussions and to determine how you will effectively engage in tough conversations e.g., exploring issues of bias.
   • Agree on a 5-10 foundational beliefs. This is your common understanding and belief about why hiring a diverse workforce is important. It can also speak to your goal to address equity and inclusion within your organization. For example “We believe our history of institutional isms has put minorities at an unfair advantage. It is our job to find ways to level the playing field.”
4. **Reduce Ambiguity**: Reduce ambiguity as much as possible when assessing candidates. Bias is more likely to show up when we’re making a judgment call based on vague criteria. Consider ways in which your measurement tools might favor dominant culture candidates. Find ways to guard against the desire to clone or find someone who is a “good fit”. There is a tendency to picture the most qualified candidate as similar to a person who has been successful in the position in the past.

- Determine in advance how candidates will be chosen. For example, are you using a rating scale? If so, are the questions Eurocentric?
- Decide on questions that are culturally relevant that get at an understanding of the culture and needs of the clients and customers you serve.
- Spend time having the committee discuss how they would personally respond to the questions they will be asking of applicants about cultural competence. This will help in their own professional development, as well as make sure you are on the same page in what you are looking for.
- Include look-fors or a rubric with each question so everyone on the interview committee is looking for the same thing from the interviewee. For example, a look-for might be that you are looking for a candidate to show racial cognizance vs. colorblind ideology.

5. **Choose Multiple Ways to Assess**: Use multiple ways to assess the candidates. This can help you get a well-rounded understanding of the candidate strengths and areas of opportunity for growth.

- Discuss what type of personality you are looking for to diversify the organization.
- Look to their references for insights on motivation, maturity, quick learning, flexibility, style of relating and other strengths that would make them a great fit for the job. Use references as one factor in selecting the best person, rather than the final check after you’ve decided who you want to hire.
- Look at a sample of the actual work they would be doing. The traditional interview alone will not give a full picture of what a candidate brings.
- Consider putting more weight in verbal responses in situations that require testing.

6. **Discuss and Explore Unconscious Bias**: When you find yourself making statements like, “I’m not sure what, but there’s something about that person that concerns me,” Or, “I don’t feel he/she is a good fit for our organization,” dig deeper and try to figure out if your unconscious bias or stereotypes are getting in the way. Explicitly revisit the conversations about bias as you’re evaluating candidates.
• Use decision-making support tools such as note taking, so you don’t have to rely on your memory.

• Keep a check-list of common ways bias shows up and refer to it often. We don’t change just because we hear something once. We have to over practice new tools and self-correct regularly.

• Openly discuss stereotypes about different groups to surface unconscious assumptions. Cultivate knowledge of differences. A “colorblind” mentality increases implicit bias because of the mental effort to suppress stereotypes.

• Take time to be deliberate in decision-making and unpack biases along the way. Talk about the reasons behind preferring or dismissing a candidate.

• Discuss verbal and nonverbal communication of the candidate after the interview. This may surface cultural bias such as preferring eye-contact, storytelling, non-linear style of communicating, etc.

• During the evaluation process, frequently insist on seeing evidence, rather than character judgments or personal opinions.

7. **Don’t Rush:** Our biases are more likely to show up when we hurry or are experiencing stress.

• Make interviews longer. As you try to get a fuller picture of a candidate’s skills and guard against bias, you will likely need more time for both engaging the candidate and discussion with the team.

• Consider 20-30 minute breaks in between interviews. 10 minutes to jot notes about the candidate you just interviewed, 10 minutes to review the application of the next candidate and time for a break. This can also decrease the chances that candidates will run into one another in the waiting area, potentially increasing their anxiety.

• Many cultures rely on oral styles of communicating and tell stories to make a point. This may take more time.

8. **Remove Distractions:** Identify and remove distractions or anything that may increase stress in the decision-making environment.

• Have the interview team to turn off their phones and not look at any calls or emails between interviews.

9. **Debrief the Process:** Take the necessary time to debrief the interview process after it is complete to identify what went well and areas for improvement.

• Consider standardizing the interview process for your entire organization.
**Culturally Responsive Practices in Interviewing**

The interview process should be one where you are trying to seek the candidate who would best contribute to the success of the organization’s mission and vision. This involves uncovering their soft skills as well as the technical.

1. Take candidates on a tour of the organization prior to interviewing them. If possible, have other stakeholders, such as students or clients conduct these tours and provide their insights on the candidates. This can also be an opportunity for the candidate to ask questions about the organization from different points of view as a way to determine if the organization is a good fit for them.

2. Provide the interviewees with the interview questions in advance. Interviewing should not be a test of who can answer the questions the quickest and most cohesively in the limited time given, but rather should leave you with a good sense of what that person would be like to work with and what they have to offer.

3. As committee members introduce themselves, have each one say a little bit about their passions or why they like working for the organization. For example, “My name is Carol, and I like working here because of the way the staff has really taken on talking about white privilege and seeing how this shows up in our policies and everyday interactions.” This can also set the stage for talking openly about institutional racism especially for candidates who may be wondering how honest they can be in that area.

4. Get to know the interviewee. Many cultures respond better to a relational style of engaging, rather than going around the table from one question to the next. Be present and try to help them relax, rather than constantly taking notes.

5. Ask follow up questions that will deepen your understanding of who the potential hire is and what they will bring to your organization.

6. Include a question that allows the candidate to offer additional information that the established questions did not capture. For example: “Is the anything about yourself that you would like us to know that wasn’t captured through the questions we asked you?”

7. Allow the candidate the opportunity to ask questions of the team, including clarifying what your questions mean.

8. Avoid jargon so as not to increase stereotype threat.

9. __________________________________________________________________________

10. __________________________________________________________________________

*Great achievements are not born from a single vision but from the combination of many distinctive viewpoints. Diversity challenges assumptions, opens minds, and unlocks our potential to solve any problems we may face.*

*Source Unknown*