# Check Your Biases

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**In-group favoritism is a common but pernicious tendency. Here's how to recognize it, and mitigate its consequences.**

BY VERNĀ MYERS

I USED TO THINK I was a great interviewer. I was always ethical, fair, and open—that is, until I interviewed two candidates for a new associate position at a law firm in Boston where I was an associate. The first candidate was a young black woman from an elite law school. Her undergraduate degree was from a Seven Sisters college; she had competed in intercollegiate sports. I liked her immediately. I found her easy to talk to, interesting, and personable. I quickly glanced at her résumé and asked her some perfunctory questions. I was practically ready to invite her out for a drink! We had a wonderful conversation, and when she left, I quickly and enthusiastically completed her evaluation.

I did not realize my bias until the next candidate, a young white man, entered my office. His résumé indicated that he was from a first-tier law school, had served in the military, and was the captain of the golf team in college. As soon as the interview began, I discovered that the excitement I had just experienced with the black woman was absent. There was no joking. I didn't explore to see if we had common experiences to compare. With the black woman, I had several exchanges like the following: "Do you know so and so?" and "Oh, I worked there. How did you like…?" I didn't ask him anything about his military service. There was probably a lot to learn about his motivation, his ability to deal with difficult situations, and his leadership skills, but because I had no familiarity with the military, I didn't ask about it. I focused on other parts of his résumé and I asked relevant questions, but my interview with him was lackluster, to say the least. I gave him a good evaluation, but it didn't have the superlatives of the black woman's.

Only when he left did it dawn on me: I had been unfair to both candidates. My biases had directed my behavior, which had influenced the quality of the interview. I saw a black woman, and before knowing her, I loved her. Why did I love her? I love myself. She was a black woman—I am a black woman. She played softball; I was the center for my college basketball team. She attended Wellesley; I went to Barnard. She showed up looking like me, and I added the rest.

Fair-minded people can usually recognize when they are struggling with a candidate (as I did with the golfer), but they don't always notice how easy it is to interview someone from their own group. As a woman of color, this experience made me realize my own biases. I saw for the first time that my actions were the same as those of the white men in my organization, of which I had been so critical. This unconscious preference is called "in-group favoritism." It is a serious problem for organizations that are trying to foster environments where people from traditionally underrepresented groups (women, people of color, gays and lesbians, people with disabilities) can thrive. As the authors of a Harvard Business Review article, "How (UN) Ethical Are You?"

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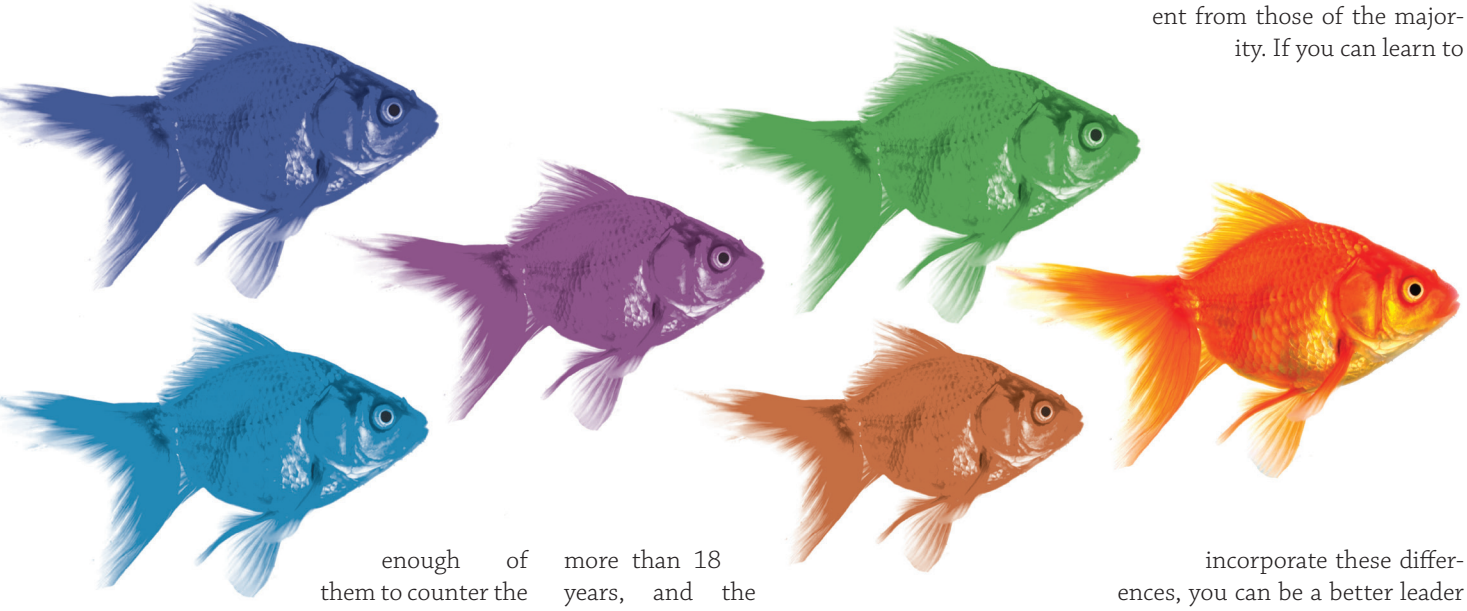
once wrote, "In-Group Favoritism is tenacious when membership confers clear advantage, as it does, for instance, among whites and other dominant social groups. Thus for an array of managerial tasks—from hiring, firing, and promoting, to contracting services and forming partnerships—qualified minority candidates are subtly and unconsciously discriminated against, sometimes simply because they are in the minority: There are not enough of them to counter the propensity for in-group favoritism in the majority."



Interviewers often look for people with similar work and communication styles, and who come from the same background, schools, neighborhoods, or socioeconomic class as they do. Operating on these assumptions, interviewers will "overhire" people from their own background, who may not be the best candidates for the position, and will be unable to recognize the talented individuals who are not like them. They will be blind to the potential of candidates who are different.

A leader's responsibility is to inspire and encourage, to be an example of the right way to think and operate. When it comes to diversity and inclusion, a good leader will be open, fair, culturally competent, free of bias, and will work well with people from all backgrounds. This is a nice idea, but there is one hitch: it isn't possible. Perfection is impossible. Humans have biases, preferences, and levels of discomfort that they cannot see. We call these "implicit" or "unconscious" biases. Even when you think you are being fair and inclusive, you may only be operating in your comfort zone, which excludes or unfairly assesses an interaction or an individual.

I have been doing diversity and inclusion work for more than 18 years, and the longer I'm at it, the more convinced I am that leading an inclusive organization is about accepting that you are not perfect—this work is a journey, and humility is the best posture. Even for the best leaders, there is no way to be inclusive without making mistakes.

Your challenge: Lead in ways that fairly identify, evaluate, and support people of all backgrounds—especially those who have been traditionally excluded and marginalized. Here are four steps you can take to support diversity and build inclusion.

### 1 Realize that you have a particular worldview shaped by your identity, culture, and life experiences.

Your worldview is a lens that filters data. It causes you to see and value some things, but miss and discount others. Recognizing and assessing how your worldview affects your biases is an important first step. In the example above, my lens set me up to be impressed with the first candidate. I liked her, or who I thought she was, because she was like me. There is nothing wrong with liking who you are, but you cannot build a diverse environment with clones of yourself. Diversity brings creativity; homogeneity eventually breeds mediocrity. Individuals outside the majority worldview have cultures, values, and customs that are different from those of the majority. If you can learn to incorporate these differences, you can be a better leader and develop richer and more relevant organizations.

### 2 Accept that you have biases, and try to counter them.

Researchers at Harvard have developed a revealing computer test called the Implicit Association Test (www.implicit.harvard.edu) that tests for your implicit views about 14 different groups. For example, the Race IAT measures your racial bias by timing how easily you associate unpleasant words with the image of a white person, as compared to a black person. At the end of the test, you are told whether you have a slight, moderate, or strong automatic preference for European or black persons or no preference at all. Of the white test takers, 75 to 80 percent show a preference for European-Americans, but 45 to 50 percent of black people show a bias toward Caucasians as well. Even

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## In-group Favoritism: Law Firms

**Large law firms are still a bastion of white male privilege.** For some time, women have constituted almost 50 percent of law school graduates and entering classes in many large law firms, but they only make up about 19 percent of partners. More than 20 percent of associates in law firms are people of color, but they only constitute 6.1 percent of all partners. Even more troubling: women of color are only 11 percent of associates and 1.9 percent of partners. For years, white men have dominated the legal industry; therefore, these institutions have been shaped according to their worldviews, values, and ways of operating. Even though the laws were changed to remove racist and sexist entry-level barriers to employment, firms are still reluctant to change their cultures and practices that disadvantage historically excluded groups. Inclusive leadership is necessary for these firms to foster and benefit from the success of women, people of color, and other underrepresented groups. — VM

traditionally marginalized groups have internalized biases. For example, when a black manager hires or promotes, he might apply the same racial biases and lens of the majority group. He may look for a black person who is most like the white people in his organization. Or the black manager will see a black candidate as a risk—he may be worried about being accused of favoritism or that the candidate won't succeed. In each case, he is afraid that his decision in support of the candidate will endanger his own career. Other IAT tests show that Americans harbor implicit biases against older people, women, immigrants, and others from historically excluded groups.

People are often distressed when told they have implicit views; they protest that they believe "fairness is what counts." Unfortunately, this denial is what prevents people from noticing their biases.

As a leader, you have to be willing to accept your biases and try to counter your unconscious, automatic responses. Be suspicious of your gut reactions. Ask open-ended, job-related questions when interviewing prospects. Look especially at the items on the résumé that are unfamiliar to you. When considering promotions, compensation, or termination decisions, use agreed-upon competencies that have been vetted for bias, and rigorously apply them.

**3 Have the courage to interrupt others displaying biased behavior against marginalized groups when you see it happening.**

So many leaders tolerate offensive behavior. Although we have changed our laws and policies to reflect that all people are equal and should be treated fairly, there are still lingering stereotypes about which groups are superior and which are inferior. Sometimes it is as simple as saying, "Susan, what do you mean when you say that?" Or, "This kind of talk really concerns me—I notice that every time we talk about Jill, you mention her children. What does the fact that she is a mother have to do with her taking on this matter?" Or, "I don't remember anyone bringing up this issue when we were discussing Alex's promotion—why is it important here?"

**4 Examine your organization's policies and systems for bias. Build inclusive processes so that you can welcome and solicit different views.**

As a leader who is trying to foster an environment that nurtures the abilities of people of all backgrounds, it is important to look at your organization's policies, systems, and practices to see how well they support or detract from your goals of inclusion. When it comes to outreach and interviewing, for example, are you saying you want to encourage people from all backgrounds to apply, but you go to the same individuals, schools, and organizations to find candidates even though these avenues rarely yield a diverse pool? What's your process for determining if you are hearing different perspectives from people in your organization or on your team and if they are getting equal opportunity to demonstrate their talent? Many people from underrepresented groups are reluctant to speak out. They may see a situation differently from the majority, but are unsure how much of a forum there is for doing things differently. They do not want to be perceived as "troublemakers" or not being "team players." Employ different strategies to solicit opinions and ideas (e.g., round robins where everyone takes a turn; secret ballots; writing thoughts and questions on index cards anonymously; soliciting information before and after meetings in person and via phone or e-mail; suggestion box). When new ideas are offered, make sure that you respond in a way that encourages more input.

It is not enough to be open-minded and well-meaning. Becoming a leader who encourages inclusion is not about being perfect; it is about being self-aware, active, and, in some cases, courageous. You have to be willing to take some uncomfortable and risky steps. You have to be willing to confront your own cultural leaning and biases, the way I did after catching my behavior in the interviews with the two candidates. You have to be willing to stand up against your own biases and the biased behavior you see in others. Lastly, you have to consider what changes need to happen to ensure that your organization's systems and policies allow for different modes of operating. The more you are able to build inclusion, the more you (and your organization) will benefit from the richness of a multicultural environment. ***DW***

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*Vernā Myers is the author of* Moving Diversity Forward: How to Go From Well-Meaning to Well-Doing. *www.movingdiversityfoward.com*