GROWERTALKS

Features

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Planting the Seeds

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I recently built a garden on my patio. One day, a friend and I went to a store to purchase the fertilizer, seeds, plants, hoses, etc. to make it come alive. The garden is an opportunity to learn, and eat the fruits and vegetables of my labor. It's a venture outside of my comfort zone.

We wandered up and down the aisles to complete our "to-buy" list. With each step, my knowledge was starting to grow, just as I hoped the plants would in their new garden.

I could not find an item on the list and it was necessary to complete my shopping. I noticed an employee in jeans, t-shirt, apron and a low baseball cap arranging plants far across the garden center. I called to him and said, "Excuse me, sir, can you help me find a trellis?"

The employee looked up, pointed in a far corner of the garden area, and said, "They're over there and I'm a she." I replied, "Thank you, I apologize." I found my item, purchased the basket of gardening necessities and left the store.

Over the next few hours, I thought about my interaction with the employee. While I planted seeds and plants in my garden, I uprooted old beliefs and started to fertilize my mind to new ideas.

I was embarrassed by my behavior. It's always an eye-opening experience to learn something about yourself, sometimes good and other times … not as much. My actions were founded on my instincts and history. I jumped to a conclusion based on visual cues and these were not accurate. She knew "who she was" and my haste didn't honor that. It would be easy to justify the situation and give myself a "get-out-of-jail-free card," but that doesn't foster learning, change and respect.

Instead, I chose to look in the "virtual mirror" to consider:

• Where else do I jump to the wrong conclusion?

• What other unconscious bias is running in my life?

• What impact does this bias have on my relationship, business, life, etc.?

• How can I be more respectful?

Unconscious bias (or implicit bias) is often defined as prejudice or unsupported judgments in favor of or against one thing, person or group as compared to another in a way that's usually considered unfair. Bias that's acted upon may lead to prejudice and become bullying or violence. We all have unconscious bias and this typically happens outside our conscious awareness.

When you think of bias, you typically consider the categories that are identified in Title VII (the 1964 Civil Rights Act) to include, race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy), sexual orientation, disability, etc. This bias is typically a learned stereotype that's automatic and mostly unintentional.

But bias may be much more subtle. Consider these:

•Success on the job based on floral knowledge.

• Confidence and success based on appearance, size or weight.

• Intelligence based on schools attended.

•Success and upward mobility based on agreement with the leader's ideas and decisions.

• Focus and success on the job based on visible body art (tattoos).

• Likeability and loyalty based on sports team of choice versus their established rival.

• Political beliefs based on vaccine/no vaccine.

You identify a bias when confronted with a situation or person, and judg-ment or emotion appear. Unconscious bias impacts our behavior and how we interact with the people around us. Bias causes us to make quick decisions.

In today's climate, people are more emotional. We've lived through unprecedented times related to health, well-being, race, politics, work, family … et al! You don't know what a person believes and how they may respond when confronted with a situation. This has always been true, but the last year has magnified this level of emotion. You need to be sensitive in the workplace with your employees.

In a recent situation, a group of employees created a Facebook page to manage their schedules. The postings became negative and race-related. Those feelings didn't reflect the values of the company, and this bias started to affect the team and work environment. The company scheduled a series of meetings and read from a script I provided that communicated their values, expectations and desired behavior.

Identifying your unconscious bias

Leaders have asked, "How do I foster a more open approach within the team. Where do I start?"

The first step is to identify your unconscious bias. Notice the "first thoughts" that come into your mind when you experience a person or situation that's new or different. These thoughts may indicate beliefs that you bring into conscious action and practice. Once you know, and are willing, to admit these biases to yourself, consider how this impacts your decisions, leadership style, brand and company.

Next, create and clearly communicate your company values. When you "walk the talk" and infuse these values into communication, company handbook, programs and processes, you reinforce their importance in the organization.

From a human resource perspective, the results of bias may be seen in recruiting new talent, career progression, performance management, compensation and consistency in dealing with employee relations issues.

Just imagine you're hiring an employee and these thoughts go through your mind:

• My customers would not like her because she has a lot of tattoos—probably a radical!

• He has no floral experience. The last time I hired someone like him, it was a disaster.

• He went to an Ivy League school. I need someone smart in this position.

• She is bubbly, energetic and outgoing. She will catch on quickly and do great in sales.

• If I were his age, I would be thinking about retirement.

• We have similar history and point of view. I know she will do great!

These statements may reflect an unconscious bias and your quick conclusion may/may not be correct! To avoid these situations, ensure your human resource processes are based on experience, results and observable behavior. Create behavioral-based interview questions to assess skill and results achieved in previous positions. Create a results-based performance evaluation for review and compensation purposes. Base employee relations conversations and decisions on observable behavior and fact.

When you take a close look at the processes used and decisions made in your business, you can determine if it's time to till the soil and plant new seeds for a different outcome.

As a business leader, it's important to communicate to employees that we all have our own beliefs and biases, but in the workplace, behavior must align with company values. When an employee acts on their beliefs and biases in a negative manner, reinforce the company values and set expectations for future behavior. Conversations and training regarding this topic are important, as they help ensure open communication to foster respect and dignity in the workplace.

The interaction at the garden center provided an opportunity for me to realize and explore my unconscious bias. I planted a garden to feed my body—little did I know the process would feed my mind and impact how I behave in the future. **GT**

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