



AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP: INCREASING TRUST BY REDUCING BIAS

I remember when I was being recruited for a job, I refused to talk to a persistent executive recruiter - until the recruiter told me she was an alum of the University of Alabama. I immediately said, "Roll Tide!" And the next thing I know, I said: "of course, I'll talk to you about the position." All my rational reasons for not wanting to talk to her went out the window because we attended the same college where people are passionate about the football team.

In my upcoming book, *"Make Me Wanna Holla: Diversity in America from Strawberry Mansion to Silicon Valley,"* I share that recollection and other perspectives on how unconscious or hidden biases bias can affect efforts to promote a culture of diversity in companies, communities, and the country.

Research shows that we use different parts of our brains to deal with those who are more similar to us and those who are different. We internalize stereotypes. We judge trustworthiness within microseconds of meeting people based on little more than facial features. The outcome? These unconscious biases shape judgments about character, abilities, and potential.

I am a diversity professional with over a decade of experience, which is deeply committed to advancing an institutional culture of equity and diversity. Based on my experience, I know that even people deeply committed to diversity and consciously striving to do the right thing are sometimes subtly influenced by their backgrounds, their experiences, and the way their brains work. It takes hard work to counteract these biases.

Here are five tips that I believe can help uncover unconscious and address bias:

Acknowledge the potential for bias. Learning about and accepting the brain's tendency toward bias is the first step in recognizing and dealing with it. The fact that our minds create bias is nothing to feel guilty about. But to truly embrace diversity, it is essential to regularly check to see if these biases are influencing our decisions.

Be wary of first impressions. Within microseconds of meeting someone, our brain decides how likable the person is based on factors such as dress, facial expression, even the shape of his or her face. These decisions are often based on past experiences and may have no rational relevance to the person in front of you. If you find yourself immediately drawn to someone or quickly put off by someone, be cautious. Often your decision is based on how similar or dissimilar they are to you.

Learn about stereotypes. Heightened awareness of common stereotypes such as "women are good communicators" or "someone named Mohammed must be Muslim" can clue you into whether stereotypes are influencing decisions. As the diversity leader in the organization, I have often challenged recruiters and hiring managers to reconsider their initial expectation that the best candidates would come from only a handful of particular schools. Look closely at your expectations to see if stereotypes color them.

Broaden your focus. The human brain has a fantastic capacity to screen out distractions. Imagine trying to drive if you paid attention to every billboard and sign. However, fixating on one idea or looking for a particular pattern in a set of data may blind you to other equally essential data. We tend to see what we expect to see, and when the data disagree, we often assume the data is wrong or ignore it.

Expose yourself to diverse experiences. Exposing ourselves to different experiences changes the unfamiliar into the familiar. One of the ways that I have done this is to have diverse images on my screensaver, which challenge my cultural assumptions.

Remember, we all have biases. But it is very humbling to realize you have biases you wish you didn't have. It is essential to recognize that valuing differences is not a matter of comfort – it's about competence and confidence.