Are Stereotypes and Prejudice Sabotaging Your Organization?

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P hrases such as "teamwork." "team-based management," and "cross functional teams," are buzzwords in companies across the country. However, achieving the necessary cooperation and cohesion on these teams is no easy task in today's diverse organizations. Work groups often resemble the United Nations with members coming from different cultural backgrounds, speaking a variety of languages, living differing lifestyles with different values. Unintentional yet formidable obstacles to productivity and cooperation can result within such diverse teams when stereotypes and prejudice come to work. Have you ever worked in a unit where the group never came together, where some members seemed isolated or where you yourself felt left out? If so. you could have been experiencing the subtle, yet powerful effect of stereotypes and prejudice that can emerge when differences meet on the job. Unconscious negative assumptions about others that are brought to a work unit, can create divisiveness, conflict and obstacles to communication and cooperation. Teams separate into "'warring camps" which refuse to share necessary information or resolve conflicts. Individuals criticize rather than help one another. Sub-groups build cohesiveness by excluding others. All these effects cost the team, cost the company, and cost the individuals who work on them. Productivity and commitment as well as morale and job satisfaction decline.

Take a look at the checklist below and see if you detect any of these signs of stereotypes and prejudice in your own department or company. Start with yourself. Have you ever been the culprit? Have you been on the receiving end of any of the following? Perhaps you've observed, overheard or watched the effect of such actions.

SIGNS OF STEREOTYPES AND PREJUDICE AT WORK

☐ 1. Ethnic, racial or gender slurs or jokes.

☐ 2. Resistance to working with members of another gender or ethnic, racial or cultural group.

☐ 3. Little or no social interaction between members of different groups.

☐ 4. Negative comments about the work habits of members of other groups.

☐ 5. Prejudicial or stereotypic comments about other groups.

☐ 6. Display of symbols offensive to ethnic, gender, racial or religious groups.

☐ 7. Complaints about other cultural, racial or gender groups. 3 8. Use of demeaning terms (e.g. boy, gals).

<div>☐   9.   Frequent "us" versus "them" comments.</div>
<div>☐   10. Complaints about favoritism.</div>

These signs are clues that there are underlying negative attitudes toward people who are in some way different. Such attitudes, while counterproductive and divisive, certainly aren't a new phenomenon. In fact, they're probably as old as the human race. Facebook and Twitter abound with often shocking examples of bigotry and comedians often use prejudice and stereotypes to get a chuckle. But it's no laughing matter when prejudice and stereotypes cause dissension, mistrust and conflict in the workplace.

Prejudice — holding preconceived and often erroneous views about other groups — is a common human response to a complex world. Stereotypes, the generalizations that are the basis of prejudice, help us organize our thinking and manage massive amounts of information. Since none of us can know every individual in every group, we create categories to simplify our world. We then slot people into those pigeon-holes. Our world becomes more manageable and stable.

These generalizations sometimes serve a useful purpose, but more often than not, they limit our perceptions about individuals and their capabilities. Stereotypes do not develop out of thin air. They are built on some experience that produced information about a group. That information may be due to a misinterpretation of cultural norms. For example, it may be "they" are not lazy, but place a higher priority on relationships than time. Or it may indeed be based on accurate information. Perhaps three people from a particular group have filed fraudulent claims against your company. But even when based on "facts," stereotypes are overgeneralizations that do not fit everyone in that group.

What may be even worse, these erroneous negative assumptions often become self-fulfilling prophecies. Like the hypochondriac who had, "See, I told you so," carved on his tombstone, what we think often becomes reality. We look for behavior that validates our preconceptions and disregard that which does not fit. We continue to collect evidence to prove our prejudices right and ignore that which proves otherwise.

If, for example, you think a particular group sticks together and doesn't want to assimilate, you will notice every time employees from this group are together, talking on breaks, eating lunch or exchanging information on the job. What you won't notice is when they are talking with people of different groups. You will probably operate according to your assumptions. You will ignore people from this group, not including or inviting them to join your interactions because you believe they want to be separate. And so it goes, each time you get "proof that your assumption is accurate, you add another brick into the barrier that separates you from them.

No one group has cornered the market on prejudice. And no person is exempt from being the target of these preconceived notions. We hold them, not just about other racial or cultural groups, but about people from other parts of this country, those of the opposite sex, members of other professions and even people with a certain color hair. What arc your assumptions about used car salesmen? Lawyers? Politicians? What prejudgments do you think others make about bureaucrats? Feminists? Yuppies?

If you see problems in your work group or organization, here are a few steps you can take to address them:

1. Challenge stereotypic statements — your own and others'.

When you think of or hear a negative comment or erroneous assumption, counter with an example that refutes the view. Or, ask the individual to give examples that support it. You also need to confront the conscious and unconscious prejudices that may be influencing you. Then, try to refute these erroneous judgments by finding examples that disprove the stereotype. Think of individuals who don't fit the overgeneralization. This can help you train yourself to challenge the knee-jerk assumptions you and others make about people.

2. Examine your own assumptions.

Keep yourself in check by listening to your own attitudes and asking yourself hard questions. Start with being alert to your own use of "them" and "they." This is usually a sign of unconsciously grouping people and setting them apart from you. Are "They" really that different from you? Look for common ground rather than differences. When have you felt or acted like that? What interests, or experiences do you share with "them?"

3. Break down barriers.

Make it a point to talk with, sit by or have lunch with someone on your team who you don't know well. It might be a coworker from another culture, one with a different educational background or someone from another generation. Getting to know people as individuals goes a long way toward breaking down the clumping of people into groups that is at the heart of stereotypes.

4. Get comfortable with the language of diversity.

There are often times when you need to refer to a collective body of individuals who are alike in some way by using a label. An often heard comment at times like these is, "I don't know how to refer to them without inadvertently offending anyone." Here are a few guidelines to help you use the most appropriate term.

a. Pay attention to trends

Preferences in terminology evolve over time. It has probably been a very long time since you have heard a person with a physical disability referred to as crippled or an African-American called colored, yet those terms were once considered appropriate. Each era has its own preferences and changes in terminology are often seen first in the media newspapers, radio, television and movies. Pay attention to new terms, for example, Asian rather than Oriental.

b. Get specific

People generally want to be called correctly by the name that coincides with their own sense of identity, hence the more specific the better. For example, use Samoan rather than Pacific Islander, Salvadoran rather than Latino, or hearing impaired rather than handicapped. General categories are just that -labels that don't fit anyone too well.

c. Ask them

Each of us is an expert on our own identity, so if you're not sure what to call a group, ask its members. You might be surprised at what you can learn. In one group recently, a participant asked one of the other members how she wanted to be referred to as African-American or Black. Her answer taught us all. She explained that Black was a label given to the group by others, while African-American was a self definition that came from the group itself. For this reason she called herself African-American.

d. Be teachable

No matter how well intentioned, we all make mistakes. When you do cause offense by using a term that is disliked, use the experience to leant by asking the individual to teach you. In one session, a trainer was beside himself when one of the women in the group objected to his use of the term "lady." None of us can know everyone's preferences or be up on all the newest terminology. Yet here was a golden opportunity for him to ask her what the term "lady" connoted to her and what she would prefer to be called instead. In another case, the group learned why one of the team members preferred the use of "sexual orientation" rather than "sexual preference." He explained that "preference" indicated a choice akin to selecting what to wear, while "orientation" was a more accurate description, indicating an innate quality such as eye color.

e. Drop the label altogether

Finally, ask yourself why the reference to gender, ethnicity, physical ability, sexual orientation or whatever category, is necessary at all. It may be best to drop the reference altogether and refer to the individual by function, profession or name. For example, the cardiologist, rather than the woman doctor: the project director, rather than the African-American engineer: or the ballerina rather than the Asian dancer.

5. Be honest with yourself.

Making generalizations about others and categorizing them into groups does not mean you are a bigot. It just makes you human. However, it is only when you admit your own assumptions that you can prevent them from directing your behavior. Acknowledge your own preferences, attitudes and thoughts about others. Then be curious and learn more. Openness to others, like charity, starts at home.