



How Diversity & Inclusion can address Systemic Racism

One of the first articles we wrote in our Resources series was on [Unconscious Bias](#) (also known as implicit bias). We explained that “all of us as humans unconsciously process vast amounts of data every day, and we rely on past experience, lessons learned, information passed on, and a wide range of sometimes accurate, sometimes barely accurate and even totally incorrect assumptions, to do this unconscious decision-making.”

It is when those assumptions are about people rather than about situations, that serious problems can arise. When a group of people with similar backgrounds and biases work to create a system, perhaps a safety system, a hiring system, a policing system, or any other, is it any surprise that their automatic biases will end up being a part of what they are designing? If that same group were more diverse, having people with very different unconscious biases, fewer of those biases would go unchallenged, and the system being created would be less likely to have weaknesses which discriminate against some people but not others.

So anything that is systemic is simply integral to the way a system works. Systemic bias, sometimes referred to as institutional bias, does not mean ‘a system to create bias’. It is for the most part unrecognized until it becomes evident that some of the system’s decisions are flawed, reflecting one or more inaccurate assumptions of its designers. It is found in recruiting and hiring practices, in benefits and working conditions, in assessments and promotions, in meetings and social connections, in training methods, and in mentoring and growth. It is evident from the degree of diversity of race, of gender, of age, of sexual orientation, of ableness, in all parts of the organization, and it is from that very diversity that one will finally find out what systemic inequities exist, and therefore what must be changed.

The Canadian Oxford Dictionary defines racism as “a belief in the superiority of a particular race; prejudice based on this; antagonism toward other races, especially as a result of this prejudice; or the theory that human abilities are determined by race”.

As long ago as 1999, the UK’s [Lawrence report](#) stated that systemic racism is “the collective failure of an organization to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.”

Few, if any, systems would ever consciously build such racism into their principles and operations, and most organizations and executives would be horrified to think that some decisions or processes are indeed biased or even outright discriminatory. However, inaccurate assumptions, based on unconscious bias, could certainly cause discrimination based on race (or gender, or age, or sexual orientation, or any other factor). It could be called ‘built-in but unintended discrimination’, and is certainly distinct from deliberate racism by an individual.

Dr. Benjamin Reese, an internationally renowned scholar on the topic of unconscious bias, noted that an organization will often make a statement such as *'Our organization respects all differences, and we work to create an environment where everyone feels included and can do their best work'*. He argued "it is going to take more than respect for all differences to deal with the structures and unconscious biases that continue to marginalize" people." He continued, "by simply adding race to the list of differences to be equally targeted in an institution's diversity strategy, we may feel some degree of comfort that we are being "inclusive," but that doesn't begin to systemically or institutionally address ... racism".

In short, while inclusion needs to be pro-active, and is often seen as the changing of process decisions, part of that effort must also be the targeting of built-in, unnoticed (and therefore systemic) assumptions which discriminate based on people being different in some way from a dominant majority. Statements, policies and protocols, therefore, need a strong implementation component, lest it be said of your company *"When all was said and done, there was a lot more said than done"*!

It is valuable to design a Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) program as an organization-wide system where principles and processes can be consistent and equally applied. That said, if we truly agree with the idea of Diversity, it is hard to see that a 'one size fits all' approach will work for every under-represented or disadvantaged group. Each has its own history, its own needs, and unique solutions are called for, even if it is within an overall D&I program, and the timing of concerted action for any particular group will probably differ. Even within one apparent group, such as race, there are many different stories and therefore needs, for example the Black community, the South Asian community and the various indigenous communities, and each of these in turn has several differing histories. Each group risks being overshadowed by other concerns if it is not addressed specifically. This is not just an interpersonal issue about people 'getting along'. It is a human rights issue.

For example, the executive suite of most organisations is notably lacking in people of colour. Here, where key decisions are made, the group is visibly dominated by white males. While 22% of Canadians belong to a visible minority, they represent less than 5% of directors at FP500 companies, according to the Canada Board Diversity Council. Similarly, women represent only 12% of board seats for 677 companies listed on the Toronto Stock Exchange, and 45% of these boards do not have a single woman on them. One third of Canadian organizations have no special strategies to recruit, hire, promote or retain a more diverse workforce, and do not measure their results. Each organizational component which lacks Diversity, and each under-represented group, will need its own focus. Again, diversity is necessary not just at entry-level positions, but throughout all levels of an organization.

Canada's former Governor-General, Michaëlle Jean said this year that racism has to be named and it has to be identified. "It demands a constant vigilance. This is how you ensure you have more social cohesion". She added "We've had enough of this. We want transformational actions to be taken. We want transformational leadership."