

The Diversity Challenge for Executives:

Learning to Ask the Tough Questions

By Patricia Pope

Increasingly, organizations that have made a serious commitment to diversity and inclusion are taking a hard look at hiring, turnover and promotion patterns, and challenging themselves with the question, “are there subtle biases operating in these decision-making processes?” As an executive, you are well aware of your organization’s commitment in these areas, yet, despite their good intentions, there isn’t as much representation at the middle to senior levels as there could be. Some of the reasons often given to explain the “thinning out” of diverse talent at more senior levels are:

- “We have a strong promote from within culture, and there aren’t as many high-caliber candidates in the pipeline.”
- “We can’t find high-caliber talent in our industry with the kinds of educational credentials and experience that we need. The candidate pool is too small, and there is a lot of competition among companies to attract them.”
- “People of color don’t want to live where we are located.”
- “The executive search firms we use never seem to be able to find diverse candidates, although we keep asking for them.”

Research gathered over the last few years through an innovative on-line diversity training program, taken by thousands of participants, who are primarily executives and managers, from many organizations suggests that bias is indeed a real problem. Designed to replace or supplement traditional instruc-



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tor-led diversity training, this program introduces participants to eight members of a new marketing team that has been created to increase market share in ethnic markets not previously targeted. The team is very diverse in terms of the functions they represent, and their racial/ethnic, age, gender, nationality, and educational backgrounds.

Participants who take the on-line course become the ninth member of this virtual team. Throughout each module, they are asked to share their perceptions and beliefs, and to participate in making decisions that affect the team. Every module begins with a pre-quiz to assess their knowledge and understanding, and there is a post-quiz at the end of each module which determines how much they have learned during the module. Meanwhile, throughout each module, participants listen to the conversations that are occurring among members of the team, as they struggle to better understand the differences among them. These conversations reflect the dialogues that have been occurring in instructor-led diversity training for the last 30 years.

Initially, members of the team are mostly polite with each other and a little inquisitive. For example, in the introductions, one of the team members announces that he is "single, but spoken for, as his parents have arranged a marriage for him, and he will be returning to India next year to meet and marry his wife." In the first module, the manager of the team shares that he has been thinking about that comment and questions, "How can you do that....marry someone you have never met. I don't get that!"

By the second module, a couple of the team members begin to take more risk in the conversations in terms of challenging others' comments and being more open and direct about some of their own feelings and beliefs. Again, mirroring the discussions that have oc-

curred during diversity training sessions for three decades, the African-American female on the team begins to be more open and outspoken, and one of the white males on the team reacts, debates and responds to her comments with his perceptions and beliefs. She acknowledges at one point that she always leaves these discussions with mixed feelings. There is a part of her that is extremely grateful that they are having these open and honest discussions. However, she also leaves these sessions concerned that her openness may cause her to be "labeled" in negative ways and perceived as "playing the race card."

At the end of the third module, the manager of the team is having a discussion with the facilitator and shares that he has been tapped for an international assignment, and asked to suggest someone from the team to replace him. At this point, the team has been together for one year, achieving some success and momentum. The facilitator congratulates him and acknowledges that he has a number of good candidates for the position.

He has identified three candidates: one is the African-American female, one is the white male, and the third is

an Asian-American male. He reviews what he perceives to be the significant contributions of each of them, and his concerns about each if not chosen.

Next, each of their three pictures appears on the screen, and on-line participants are asked to select who should receive the promotion. The next screen asks them to select 3 of 8 reasons why they chose the person they chose. And this is where the data becomes extremely telling.

The African-American female was positioned to be the most obvious candidate. She has an undergraduate degree in marketing from Spelman, a graduate degree in marketing, three years experience as a brand manager in a previous company, and her teammates have acknowledged that she, more than any other member of the team, has been driving the team to get the results achieved over the last year.

Our database of thousands of participants reveals that she is chosen approximately 25% of the time, while the Asian-American male is consistently chosen approximately 60% of the time. The white male consistently comes in as third choice.

The obvious question is, "Why does



this happen?” When the manager is sharing his perceptions of the three candidates, there is one comment that he makes.....”On a couple of occasions she has ‘ruffled some feathers,’ and I had to get involved to straighten things out.” We believe this subtle phrase taps into negative stereotypes of “the angry Black female” or “too confrontational” and therefore causes participants to select Charlie, the Asian-American, instead. Another factor is that Charlie has worked for the company for 16 years as a scientist, and the notion that “seniority” ought to count for something also influences decisions. However, Charlie has no previous management experience and no marketing credentials or background.

Additional data collected from participants reveals even more. Approximately 60% of Asian participants select Valarie, the African-American female for the promotion. They appear to set aside any “preference” they may have for someone more like them, i.e., an Asian, to receive the promotion, and select the most qualified candidate. The participants who are least likely to choose Valarie are white females and white males.

At the end of the last module, participants are asked who they perceive to be “least effective” when interacting with other members of the team. Although Michael, the white male, is generally perceived by participants to be more than twice as *ineffective* as Valarie, the difference in selecting them for the promotion opportunity is less than 5%.

So what does all this mean? First, it suggests that stereotypes are alive and well. Had the “ruffled feathers” comment been made about the white male, would he have been perceived instead as assertive, a risk-taker, a real “go-getter”? Different consequences for the same behavior, unfortunately, are a companion of stereotypes.

Finally, in the last module, participants are asked “how much productivity is lost with your current team due to individual differences among team members?” Once again, the data is incredibly revealing. Responses range from 0-10% to 76-100%, with the majority of responses landing in the 11-25% range.

Statement Question

“Not a good fit!”

“What is it specifically that makes this candidate not a good fit?”

“Not ready now!”

“What will it take to get this person ready, and have we done our part in developing him/her?”

“Has had some problems!”

“What is the candidates’ perspective on this? Interacting with others, i.e, have we asked how he/she experiences our ‘ruffled feathers?’ Work environment? Who really owns the problem?”

“Other candidates are stronger!”

“Who are the other candidates? Have they had more access to informal development, mentors and the right kinds of developmental assignments to prepare them?”

Peter Drucker has said, “The best way to predict the future is to create it.” Thus, if executives want their middle to senior levels to be more diverse, they will have to create that by learning to ask the tough questions that will uncover subtle biases.

Executives need to ask themselves:

- How much are our ongoing recruiting efforts to create a representative workforce costing us?
- What is the hidden cost of unwanted turnover costing us?
- What would a 10% increase in productivity add to our bottom line if we learned how to more effectively manage differences?

And most importantly, executives need to begin to ask additional questions about the input they are receiving from others in their organizations who are evaluating candidates for hiring and

promotion. Some of the common phrases used and the follow-up questions that need to be asked (see box above).

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