Unpacking Our Bias Toward Unconscious Bias Training

The effectiveness of unconscious bias training has been (rightfully) questioned over the last few years. The most effective programs have 7 design features in common.

From the desk of...

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Would it surprise you to learn our brains are capable of unconsciously processing 11M pieces of information per second? Just 40 of those consciously? And just 7 of those as working memory?

Probably not, if you've ever taken part in unconscious or implicit bias awareness training; a type of training that has, over the last few years, been (rightfully) questioned for its effectiveness.

In part because of its story of origin: it began at a time and in a place where the main driver was to minimize corporate risk, comply with government legislation, and avoid expensive litigation.

In part, because simply becoming aware of the 180+ biases we all possess and have come to rely on - to help us recognize patterns, avoid harm, and prevent cognitive and sensory overwhelm - is not enough to drive a change in our (often unconscious and well-meaning) behaviours.

In fact, it's been determined this training can sometimes unintentionally reinforce stereotypes and risk sending the message that our biases are unavoidable and therefore beyond our control.

This can lead to more discrimination, not less. And lead to understandable cynicism about why it's still being taught, by whom, and to what end.

Not all unconscious bias training is ineffective though.

Researchers have identified that the most impactful unconscious bias training has these design features in common:

- Goes beyond a review of the theory of bias and its impact.
- Contradicts stereotypes and allows connections across difference.
- Helps create empathy and motivate inclusive behaviours.
- Empowers participants to recognize & interrupt personal & team bias.
- Provides strategies, tools and practice to help change behaviour.
- Uses organizational data to set a baseline and track progress.
- Avoids a "one and done" or check-box exercise approach to training.

The final point is the most important one and key to mitigating one of the top 10 quit risks we identified our ongoing blog series; that is, failure to address workplace inequity and exclusion.

Organizations committed to attracting, developing and retaining a diverse, global workforce understand they need to have a broader strategy to root out and address bias at its source.

They understand it's not enough to rely on the willpower and good intentions of individuals. It requires the design of thoughtful data-informed, systems-level checks and balances across the employee lifecycle, clear accountabilities, and ongoing measurement.