



Under New Management: My First Professional Experience of Unconscious Bias

Submitted by Dawn E. Shedrick, LCSW-R

On a rainy afternoon in the mid-1990's, I was called into my supervisor Anna's (name changed for privacy) office for what she described as "a very critical meeting." As I walked in and sat down in a chair across from her desk, I remember worrying if I was about to be fired. Her constricted affect gave me no indication of what was to come. However, within a few moments she flashed a bright smile and offered me a promotion to Program Manager. I remember the details of the day not only because of the generous promotion, but also because of a directive I was given shortly after I accepted it.

After discussing the formalities of my new position (which included a generous salary increase!) with Anna and as I thought we were wrapping up the meeting, my supervisor indicated that she wanted to talk about one of my supervisees, Andre (name changed for privacy). For the sake of clarity, I had already been supervising Andre for almost a year. That wouldn't change with my new position. Andre was a reliable, personable, skilled case manager who was studying for his MSW at that time. He was always punctual, often brought cookies and other baked yummys to the office and received exemplary feedback for his work with our linkage partners in the community. So imagine my dismay when Anna instructed me to prepare a written warning to issue to Andre for wearing his hair in dreadlocks.

I was in my mid-twenties and inherited my previous supervisory position after the long-time Program Supervisor left the agency to pursue another opportunity. Although Anna was a skilled, generous and compassionate supervisor, her beliefs about culturally appropriate hairstyles and dress were clearly informed by her Italian-American heritage, a dearth of personal and professional relationships with people of color and generally accepted codes of professional presentation and



conduct. Note: this took place in the mid-1990's; it is still legal to ban dreadlocks in the workplace in 2018. Another important point to note: more than 80% of the clients we served were African-American and Latinx and lived in communities that were predominately comprised of people of their racial and ethnic demographics.

Before I even addressed the fact that I was asked to issue a warning to an employee without discussing the matter with him first, I asked Anna if she could clarify the specific policy that she believed he violated. She believed the agency policy about professional behavior, dress and grooming applied. We respectfully debated the merits of her beliefs, during which I educated her about the cultural relevance of dreadlocks- a style that many of our own clients embraced. In the end, she rescinded her directive and thanked me for the discussion. In fairness to Anna, she acknowledged her unconscious bias and committed to being conscious of how her beliefs impact her management style and decisions. There were no further incidents of this kind during my tenure that the organization.

This was a watershed moment in the beginning of my professional journey. I became fully conscious of and owned my identity as a Black and Native American woman in nonprofit management. I became conscious of what that meant for me...and those I work for and with in the macrocosm of the human services universe. I also became conscious of the need for support to help me process incidents or issues like this in a culturally relevant context.

Let me be clear: I have received stellar supervision throughout my career. I've also had access to wonderful opportunities that I didn't dream of when I began this social work journey. But I've also been praised one-too-many times for being "an articulate speaker", shocked one-too-many a people



when I've executed a task successfully and have too often been the only person of color at the table to develop and manage programs whose primary beneficiaries are people of color.

Had I been able to access the training, coaching and mentoring offered to participants in the Network's [Changemakers of Color Program](#) twenty years ago, I would have had culturally relevant support to process incidents like the Andre situation. I would have been given the training, guidance and access to resources to address the racial and ethnic disparities in human services management and leadership. And I would have known much sooner that I wasn't alone.