Op-ED: The Power of Networks to Address Bias

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are important buzzwords in today’s society, but the reality is that these words are just words. They mean nothing without action. Our increased [diversity](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/06/14/most-americans-express-positive-views-of-countrys-growing-racial-and-ethnic-diversity/) as a country and heightened [political climate](http://www.people-press.org/2016/03/31/2-views-on-immigration-diversity-social-issues/) has elevated conversations around diversity. You cannot read the newspaper or turn on the news without seeing conversations about immigration or racism. These discussions elicit perspectives and views that are diverse and unique depending on who happens to be speaking at the time. Our words and beliefs are a reflection of our environments. Where we live, work and whom we associate with ultimately impact the decisions we make and how we feel about other people. These are structural influences. Culture also plays a role which includes our history and its values and beliefs.

That said these influences often have an [unconscious](https://www.catalyst.org/be-inclusive/unconscious-bias) influence on our decisions. We make these decisions automatically and without thought over some of the consequences. We do what we feel is right or have been conditioned to believe is right. This can produce implicit bias, and frequently does. The result however, is that regardless of how we feel or what our intent is some of our decisions are biased and because they are biased, some of our [decisions](https://www.forbes.com/sites/peterdone/2019/01/25/battling-unconscious-bias-in-the-workplace/#3407fc097e99) negatively impact others.

For example, the nonprofit sector, a sector known to most for views that would lean on the side of opportunity and justice disproportionately favors white nonprofit leaders for [executive](http://racetolead.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/RacetoLead_ExecutiveSummary-2.pdf) and [board of director](https://leadingwithintent.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/LWI-2017.pdf) positions. This [racial leadership gap](http://racetolead.org/) has persisted historically and exists currently. A study by the [Building Movement Projec](http://www.buildingmovement.org/)t (http://www.buildingmovement.org) revealed three field level problems that contribute to this racial leadership gap. 1. “Executive recruiters are not equipped to identify potential candidates of color for top-level nonprofit positions, 2. Boards are predominantly white and often do not support the leadership of staff of color, and 3. Nebulous concepts like “fit” are great hiding places for implicit bias.”

Verna Myers, an Inclusion Strategist once said, “Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance” (The Verna Myers Company). There is no denying that people of color are treated differently in this country due to a history of slavery and hundreds of years of systemic racism. People of color face adverse physical, [mental](http://thenationshealth.aphapublications.org/content/45/1/1.3) health, and [economic](https://socialequity.duke.edu/sites/socialequity.duke.edu/files/site-images/FINAL%20COMPLETE%20REPORT_.pdf) outcomes in addition to daily [microaggressions](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/microaggressions-in-everyday-life/201011/microaggressions-more-just-race).

While systemic racism cannot be cured overnight, workplaces can be more intentional about creating a workplace that is inclusive for all people. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion are just words, but **you** can impart meaning to them.

In the nonprofit sector, we know that social norms of bias and exclusion exist. We are aware of [white privilege](https://nationalseedproject.org/Key-SEED-Texts/white-privilege-unpacking-the-invisible-knapsack) and understand bias to know that it negatively impacts many of those we serve. We are aware of institutional racism. So, what do we do about this awareness? It is simply no longer enough to have knowledge of issues or to be familiar with them without taking action. As a sector, if we hope to experience a just world, all people must be accepted and provided opportunity.

Personal Networks have the power to address and curb our biases. Whom we know and whom we associate with matters. Who is in your network? What do they look like? How diverse is it? Social stigma exists because people fear and question that which they do not know or are unfamiliar with. In the nonprofit sector, white leaders are seen as the epitome of leadership. This has been the norm, but norms can be changed. By being more intentional about diversity and inclusion in our personal lives, we are more likely to see equity in our professional lives. The nonprofit sector has to practice what it preaches. It cannot advocate for race equity for its clients without ensuring race equity exists in its own internal practices. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “We may have all come on different ships, but we’re on the same boat now.” We are all on the same boat, but now the real test is whether everyone is given a fair shot at leadership.