

CREATING SUSTAINABLE CHANGE WITH EVERYDAY PRACTICES TO LEVEL THE PLAYING FIELD

How Reducing Bias Can Increase Productivity and Engagement

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Supported by a generous grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, our team worked with 14 companies on their performance evaluations system and 14 companies on access to career-enhancing opportunities to help them make sustainable changes towards leveling the playing field for all employees. Here's what you need to know:

- **Bias reduction increases productivity and engagement.** Employees who face bias are nearly three times more likely to be disengaged at work. Research also shows that that an engaged workforce is more productive, achieves higher profitability, and has less turnover. Companies that face bias head-on and apply strategies to create a fair workplace will see productivity and engagement benefits that will pay dividends.
- **Starting a new initiative to create a level playing field requires different work than taking steps further along in the journey.** Companies that are just getting started need to focus on getting support from leadership and managers and on setting up a corporate roadmap for sustainable progress. Companies that already have the buy-in and the roadmap can start implementing effective strategies to reduce bias. Companies at this stage are better placed to take advantage of tools like Bias Interrupters, which can easily be incorporated into existing company materials.
- **Making huge changes is hard, but making incremental progress is not.** 72% of our companies were able to implement changes to interrupt bias in their systems and started to see measurable progress in a short time period. The types of changes they were able to make differed depending on where they were when our partnerships started, but what was consistent was that companies both wanted to and were able to make changes to their systems to create a more level playing field.





- Some companies already knew they had a problem, and had the buy-in from leadership to track metrics and make changes to their systems. These companies were able to integrate bias interrupters into their systems to target company-specific issues. One successful company said:

“What we've done is add the SBI model method into our materials, and then we also have two trainings that we offer to our associates. We talk about how do you write [an evaluation], and we added SBI as a great example of how to write a fair, fact-based, evidence-based example. We had 8 or 900 associates go through that.”

- Some companies knew they needed to make changes because they've been hearing about issues through informal channels, but may not yet have the concrete evidence needed to really convince leadership. Such companies were still able to implement some changes:

“We are going to integrate the bias interrupters resources (guide for writing effective performance reviews and checklist). We are also going to add a post-performance review conversation survey for employees to share the effectiveness of their experience.”

Regardless of where they are in the process of reducing bias, any company can start somewhere and then keep moving.

- **Companies are still making progress towards DEI.** Despite the turmoil over the past year, all of the companies we worked with still had the goal of creating a level playing field for all employees (although sometimes with a lower budget). Even though the language around this work may have changed, corporate commitments to reducing bias in the workplace have not. For example, after participating in our workshop designed to address bias in performance evaluations, 100% of participating companies stated that they were likely to incorporate the information learned into their internal organizational trainings or materials.
- **Business systems are interlinked.** Performance evaluations and promotions don't happen in a vacuum – they're influenced by access to opportunities, hiring, and the larger corporate strategy for bias reduction. Companies that want to see a diverse group ascend into leadership positions need to take a holistic view: if you're not hiring a diverse group of employees, it's going to be an uphill battle to ensure that a diverse group has access to the high-profile work necessary for promotion.





- **Managers are a key change lever, but they need tools to succeed.** Many organizations have been impacted by layoffs and hiring freezes at the same time as an expansion of responsibilities. Managers are central to the employee experience, but disengaged managers create a disengaged workforce. We've heard from organizations across industries: it's time to "do more with less." That's not a realistic recipe for manager engagement. Simple tools like Bias Interrupters give managers the support and structure they need to create a fair workplace.
- **Access to high-profile, career enhancing opportunities is essential to promotions,** but the process for getting those opportunities is not always standardized. When competency-based decision-making is the gold standard, it is critical for managers to identify the opportunities that will allow a diverse group of employees to both develop and demonstrate key competencies.
- **Shining a light on bias in access to opportunities can help generate buy-in for structural changes.** Organizations should consider collecting data about access to the high-profile work and office housework: for example, including a couple questions in a quarterly pulse survey, asking managers to keep track of who the high-profile assignments are going to, and looking at who is actually being promoted can tell you whether rates are fair for all groups of employees at your organization. Once you've got the evidence, it's time to act. Make sure managers understand that this is an organizational priority – it's their job to make sure their employees have access to the work, and it's your job to support them. Consider whether you can create new opportunities like networking events to broaden access, and set up formal rotation systems and administrative support staff to help level the office housework burdens.
- **AI tools have gained popularity in the workforce over the past few years, but their application needs to be carefully considered.** With the backing of their organizations, overloaded managers are looking for shortcuts like implementing AI in their performance evaluations process. Unfortunately, AI-generated evaluations contain all of the common forms of gender and racial bias found in manager-generated evaluations, which means that reducing bias and creating a fair and effective evaluations system cannot be done simply by implementing an AI tool. Doubling down on using AI to generate evaluations under the guise of productivity is shortsighted; employees have an overwhelmingly negative reaction to getting AI-generated evaluations and this exacerbates their feelings of disengagement.

