SWEATING THE SMALL STUFF: SUBTLE DISCRIMINATION AND MICRO INEQUITIES

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SUBJECTIVE PERCEPTION OF WORK ENVIRONMENT

- Positive responses to the question, “Do you feel valued/respected in your workplace?” Correlate to virtually every positive organizational metric
  - Morale
  - Retention
  - Productivity
  - Performance
  - Engagement
Most Importantly

- If someone truly believes they are valued and respected, and that their contributions are also respected and valued.
- They will know that it is acceptable to raise concerns about things that interfere with their safety, productivity or well-being.
- The work environment becomes inclined to self correct.
Respect is not

- The absence of bad behavior
- Developing personal relationships with others
- Simple professionalism
The transmission of respect or disrespect is both explicit and subtle

- We scan for and perceive intentional and unintentional cues
- We compare the cues we get to the norms we observe
- From this we deduce our stature in the eyes of others
- This forms the foundation of our organizational experience
Case A

- An employer is deciding whether to promote Jones or Smith to a supervisory position at its firm. Jones is white; Smith is African-American.
- The employer thinks that both employees are excellent, but it chooses Jones on the ground that employees and customers will be “more comfortable” with a white employee in the supervisory position.
In this Session

- We will explore the concept of implicit bias
- We will discuss the behavior manifested by those with implicit bias and the impact on the work environment
- We will discuss strategies employers can build into existing anti-harassment efforts to try to educate about and reduce micro inequities and subtle harassment
Parameters and Clarifications

- The issues and research to be covered focus on understanding how subtle harassment and microinequities can affect the work culture, environment, and experience.
- There is no intention to assert that these issues alone create actionable behavior; in fact, the contrary is more likely true. However,
- Microinequities and subtle harassment can lead to repeated internal complaints and claims that are not ultimately found to reach a level of unlawful behavior.
Subtle Harassment and Micro inequities

- Should be part of any employer’s awareness and education; increasing sensitivity to minor slights increases sensitivity to all slights
- Microinequities may be more important for key business metrics such as employee engagement, retention (particularly protected group retention) and productivity
Defining Implicit Bias

- Bias by individuals who are motivated by egalitarian values but also harbor anti-minority or gender-related feelings
- Stereotypes harbored by individuals which influence automatic and unintentional expressions.
Mindbugs and Blindspots

- Our perceptions are profoundly affected by our experiences, beliefs, sensory preferences and assumptions

- The suspect staggered away knocking a serving dish to the floor and spilling its contents

- The suspect staggered away knocking a serving dish of tomato soup on to the white carpet
  - Why is the second suspect far more likely to be judged guilty?
Blind Spots and Mind Bugs

- Ant
- Spider
- Feelers
- Web
- Fly
- Poison
- Slimy
- Crawl
- Bee
- Wing
- Bug
- Small
- Bite
- Fright
- Wasp
- Creepy
Which words repeat?

- Maple
- Ant
- Poison
- Fly
- Stem
- Berry
- Feelers
- Slimy
- Birch
- Wing
- Insect
- Bee
- Leaves
- Tree
- Roots
- Web
- Bug
- Small
- Oak
- Crawl
- Acorn
- Wasp
- BranchWillow
- Fright
Each year, do more people die from a or b?

1. a) murder b) diabetes
2. a) murder b) suicide
3. a) car accidents b) abdominal cancer
Availability Heuristic

- When instances of one type of event comes to mind more easily we tend to occur the first must occur more frequently in the world.
Implicit Bias

- Substantial data collected through the Implicit Association Test (IAT), which can be found at https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/
- Growing certainty that implicit bias as reflected links to actual behavior (microinequities)
Well intentioned but negatively disposed...

- Hiring managers with implicit racial bias will easily turn to the more highly qualified candidate, but when faced with two equally qualified candidates, more likely to choose the white candidate.

- Implicit gender stereotyping predicts the extent of subjective “dislike” of confident, competitive and highly qualified female applicants, and therefore likelihood they would be recommended for hire.
Implicit Bias in Action

- Applicants with African American sounding names had to send 15 resumes to get a callback, compared to 10 for applicants with white sounding names. White names yielded as many callbacks as an additional eight years of experience yielded for AA names.

- Female postdoc applicants had to be significantly more productive than male applicants to receive the same peer review score. She had to publish 3 more papers in a high ranked journal or 20 in lesser known journals.
Intergroup discrimination less and less likely involves explicit acts of aggression towards the out group and more likely to involve everyday acts of helping the in group.

The flimsiest of group identities shifts behavior profoundly. Individuals in pretext-based groups still willing to discriminate in allocating resources, giving more to their own group.

- Even willing to pay a cost in resources in order to maximize the difference between “us” and them (Tajfel, 1970)

Forty percent of White Americans and Asian American, a somewhat smaller group of Latinos, and a substantially smaller, but not negligible proportion of African Americans show white preference on the IAT – Uncomfortable egalitarians(Banaji and Greenwald 2013)
Implicit Bias creates inadvertent behavior

- Implicit Bias
- Egalitarian Self-Concept
- Microinequities
Microinequities

- Coined by Mary Roe of MIT
- Given substantial clinical boost by writings of clinician Derald Wing, et al
- Combined with work on intrinsic bias at Harvard and University of Virginia, provides compelling case for the potency of implicit bias and subtle discriminatory behaviors.
Microinequities Defined

- Small, every day inequities through which individuals are treated differently because of their identity or “outsider status.”
- Brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative slights and insults.
How Do Microinequities Manifest?

- Communication or demonstration of lower expectations
- Yielding to stereotypes
- Excluding
- Different judgment for similar conduct
- Less Attention, Less Support
- Paternalism
- Spokesperson questions
- Non verbals
- Baiting questions
- Avoidance
- Color blindness
- Pathologizing cultural norms
- Second Class Citizen
The Challenge of Discussing Microinequities

- The “angry” ____________
- The race/gender/religion card
- Seems hypersensitive and trivial
- Easily explained away
- Ephemeral and can feel “political”
- "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence."
Microinequities do affect

- Overall work climate
- Personal confidence
- Degree of frustration
- Feelings of isolation
- Engagement and Performance
System 1 vs. System 2 Thinking

- Two cognitive systems:
  - System 1 is rapid, intuitive and error prone
  - System 2 is more deliberative, calculative, slower and often more likely to be error free.
  - System 2 can override system 1
Separately, the Bat costs one dollar more than the ball. What does the ball cost?
Hypothetical 50 year old male patient who showed up with chest pain

Photograph of the man randomly varying race

Although doctors insisted they were not racially biased, they were more likely to prescribe an anti clotting procedure to the white patient and a less aggressive approach to the black patient
About 1 in 4 Doctors guessed that the study was designed to test racial bias. They stopped and considered how they might be acting differently based on race.

The researches found that this insightful subgroup did not treat patients differently once they paused to consider whether race was an issue.
If Micro Inequities Persist

- They become the “silent reality” shared by a class
- The boat rises on a tide of shared reality
- Conversations between individuals with shared reality perpetuates the underlying experience of bias.
Microinequities

- Create a subjective experience of a hostile work environment
  - Without the specific behavior evidence to support it
  - The feelings are as real as those brought about by unlawful behavior but require a greater organizational capacity to respond
Repeated allegations of harassment or discrimination that are sincere but not supportable may be the result of the cumulative impact of more subtle and lawful, but hurtful actions.

Listen for common laments, "I don’t fit in," “I can’t be successful.”

Do an assessment by using surveys or individual interviews and ask about normative activities and atmosphere.
Sample Assessment Questions

- Tell me about how meetings go here. Does everyone get an equal opportunity to be heard? Has your participation satisfied you?

- Sometimes people feel they are held to different standards or evaluated differently. Have you felt that way? Do you know why?

- Do you have the same opportunity to succeed here as others? Why or why not.
Steps for Employers

- Raise awareness
- Build a strong culture
- Use surveys to uncover issues and address them
- Integrate these concepts into leadership development training
- Identify the concepts in values statements
- Facilitate open discussions about subtle behavior and bias
- Facilitate feedback
Key Strategies

☐ Teach supervisors and managers the power of “micro affirmations”

☐ Use 360 feedback to ensure a wider view

☐ Offer “ally” or “bystander” training as part of anti-harassment/respectful work environment training

☐ As with any employee issue, listen, take it seriously and don’t jump to judge an employee’s motivation.
The Future

- Many view the Iowa decision as “round one” of a long time effort to have the courts honor the presence of implicit bias as an element in broad based discrimination claims.
- Growing body of literature supporting both the presence of implicit bias and its impact on interpersonal conduct, particularly in the workplace.
- Employers can be ahead of the curve by raising awareness, promoting positive disposition across race and culture and seeking representation in the workforce.
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