

Dismantling the barriers of unconscious bias: Q&A with Fidelis' Patricia Roufca

Unconscious bias can be a significant barrier in creating a more inclusive workplace – but challenging these biases is no easy feat.

Patricia Roufca, group COO and general counsel at Fidelis, introduced unconscious training at her firm after she experienced it for herself – a move which initiated a grass-roots movement towards diversity and inclusion (D&I) planning at Fidelis.

In an interview for *Insider Progress*, Roufca explains where unconscious bias can creep into the workplace and how Fidelis has set about addressing this challenge.

What is unconscious bias?

Unconscious bias results from the way our brains filter information in order for us to navigate the world without being overwhelmed. We all have unconscious biases so what is important is that we challenge ourselves on the judgements we form and decisions we make to minimise their impact.

Is there a business case for tackling unconscious bias and if so, what?

We believe business performance is inextricably linked to the talent of the people within the company, and the ability of those people to thrive. Through minimising unconscious bias we improve our people-based decisions e.g. securing the best person for the role or identifying a suitable candidate for promotion. Through creating an inclusive workforce we then enable these individuals to optimise their productivity.

In what workplace situations can unconscious bias creep in and how should companies address these situations?

Recruitment, performance management, promotional reviews, and compensation reviews are all core management activities which can be impacted by unconscious bias. Building robust processes which include checks and balances (e.g. skills testing in recruitment) and assessing the outputs of processes (e.g. relative ratings performance distributions for males and females) are two ways that companies can work towards mitigating unconscious bias.

What is Fidelis doing internally to combat unconscious bias?

As a senior female executive having experienced unconscious bias, I found that my voice was unintentionally suppressed at times by male colleagues. I raised this to our group CEO and chairman, Richard Brindle in early 2018. He was very supportive to hearing my experiences and implicitly understood the impact that this systemic issue had on our business.

Being able to raise this issue with Richard is indicative of the environment I am in – having a voice, being able to use it and getting support from Richard. We immediately set about

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providing mandatory unconscious bias training for all employees in the business; an initiative that was well received.

This was an important first step, as many people do not even realise what unconscious bias is. In 2019 the Fidelis D&I plan has further expanded on this training through workshops for all employees to build awareness of unconscious bias, to identify systemic barriers, and to create a grass-roots movement towards D&I planning.

Additionally, we have carried out unconscious bias recruitment training for all managers, and a review of core HR processes. As a result, our recruitment process now includes skills assessments, behavioural assessments, and panel interviews for all roles. Additionally we now include an assessment of internal equity between male and female employees for both performance rating allocations and compensation decisions.

Is unconscious bias the only barrier to diversity and inclusion in organisations?

No; D&I matters are by definition nuanced and complex. Like all companies, Fidelis is on a journey – we don't have all the answers yet! We are however committed to continuous improvement and to creating an environment where all employees can 'bring their whole selves to work'.



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