

Re-Branding Unconscious Bias

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Unconscious bias is all the rage. Barely a blip on Google's radar in 2010, a [Google trends search](#) shows how much the term has now [gone mainstream](#). This is progress. Every manager can learn from the excellent [The Invention of Difference](#) by Jo and Binna Kandola, the 4-part series by [Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant](#) in the New York Times, or the various articles that have appeared in this magazine, by [Herminia Ibarra](#), [Robin Ely](#), and [Deborah Kolb](#), [Joan C. Williams](#), and others. And at our firm, we're seeing a sudden surge in interest for sessions on unconscious bias to address gender imbalances. It's a promising shift from the exclusively women-focused initiatives that have dominated corporate balancing efforts for the past couple of decades.

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I applaud this progress, and to maximize its impact, I'd like to suggest a productive way of bringing bias to the table, without losing half your guests. While hitting people over the head with accusations of bias may be a satisfaction for some, it is not well received by many.

The Chief Diversity Officers who ask us for these programs love them. But managers generally don't. Defensiveness, contempt, or stonewalling are all on pretty immediate display. Is there a better, less abrasive way to achieve the same outcome? Can we build more inclusive management styles that leverage today's talent and serve today's heterogeneous customers without alienating the people we want to engage? Yes, and it starts with what we call it. Focusing people on positive outcomes is far more motivating than accusing them of misbehavior – conscious or unconscious. And it's simple enough to do. It starts with branding.

Recently, we were invited to help with the launch of a company's gender initiative. They were all set with presentations that highlighted the gender imbalance in their management teams and framed the loss of female talent as a serious problem that needed management's attention. This is the common default framing. (We call it the unconscious bias of the gender teams.) The Head of Diversity was going to announce, at the annual company management conference, that she was launching a series of unconscious bias training sessions on gender for the several hundred managers in the room.

The only problem is, this is a guaranteed, set-up-to-fail mechanism. How enthusiastic do you think the people in the room, 80% of them men, will be to hear that? Most of your company's managers, male or female, are probably committed to the idea that their company's systems are based on a meritocracy principle. They don't really like being accused of gender bias before they even enter the room. The fact that all humans are biased to some degree is [well researched](#). And addressing this reality is key. But there are more or less effective ways to bring the topic into companies. It starts with flipping the issue from a divisive, negative problem to a unifying, shared opportunity.

So focus on the opportunity, not the problem. Start by focusing on the key strategic goals. What are your 2020 objectives, targets and milestones? Get the CEO to start there. And then suggest that gender balance is a lever to help you reach that goal. Here's an example from a real company we've worked with:

We set a bold target of hitting \$10 billion in revenue by 2020. Getting the very best talent and delivering the very best customer service will be the dual keys to our success. Understanding, anticipating and delighting customers means ensuring we know what they want and how they feel. That requires having the best balance of talent in-house, talent that "gets" where our fast-changing market is heading. I believe gender balance is one of the key levers to unlocking huge, untapped talent and market opportunities. Today's talent pool is balanced, so are our customers. We want to reflect that reality inside. So we are going to focus on leadership skills and tools to build balanced teams that continually deliver stellar service.

This “tone from the top” has a different impact. It results, from the start, with a more engaged, less defensive management team.

So, in summary, if you are working on launching or accelerating a push for more gender balance in your company, start by asking these questions:

- **Strategic opportunity:** Are you positioning gender as a problem or as an opportunity?
- **Positive branding:** Are you using language that accuses or language that invites them to build skills and enhance leadership impact?
- **Authentic leadership:** Are you engaging with the majority of your managers on things they understand are central to both their individual and company success? Or are your efforts perceived as politically correct, tick-the-box exercises?

It is an important moment on the road to more balanced businesses. But the final goal isn't balance. The goal is more engaged employees and more connected customers. You probably can't repeat that too often. Leaders need to keep everyone's eye on that ball, while drawing everyone into the game.

Best-in-class companies are moving on from an era of over-focusing on women as the solution to balance. Now, they are focusing on managers. It's an unprecedented opportunity to get everyone positively primed for balance. Let's not lose them by accusing them. Companies are spending a lot of time and money on leadership. Let's make sure that whatever the 21st leadership model you work with, gender “bilingualism” is built in.

We must practice what we preach about leading inclusively. Do your messages speak to 100% of your people?