THE BLUEPRINT A FRAMEWORK FOR ADDRESSING UNCONSCIOUS BIAS AT WORK

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The number one question I am always asked when it comes to diversity and inclusion initiatives is "How will we know we're doing the right thing?"

I have been asked several versions of this question in podcasts, at conferences, on panels, by CEOs, during a fireside chat, and in educational workshops by employees.

No one wants to get this wrong. Or at least, from what I have seen, no one wants to appear as if they don't care. However, the difference between whether you actually care or whether you care more about the appearance of seeming to care makes all the difference to your success.

The first question I ask company leaders when I am tasked with advising them on their next steps is "What is your strategy?" Unfortunately, it is no longer surprising that they answer all too frequently, "We don't know."

My goal is to answer both "How do we do this right?" and "What is your strategy?" because the answers to both of these questions are related.

The concept of diversity is difficult because there isn't a one-size-fits-all solution. What works for one company will not work for another. Companies are being applauded for their statements, their social media presence, and their loyal customer following, and business leaders want to be that company, but aren't willing to do the work it takes to et there. Instead, there is a belief that diversity is minimal, and inclusion is elusive. Business leaders make excuses and use them as a shield to absolve them of their duty as leaders to do the work.

Some of those excuses include:

Diversity doesn't work.
I don't see color.
We just hire the best without regard to gender or race.
We don't want to lower the bar on job requirements.

I find these statements to be troublesome. At best they are ignorant, and at worst they build barriers to diversity by creating a culture where the status quo is acceptable. These statements create roadblocks to innovation by stifling the ability of leaders to harness the creativity of their workforce by restricting diversity.

These excuses stem from failing to be clear on your strategy. What is your motivation for wanting to take action? Do you have an authentic desire to change or is this a publicity stunt to placate your employees, customers, and investors?

The excuses also stem from failing to define organization values and align strategic diversity outcomes to those values. Do you know what you stand for as an organization? Do your employees know? Are you clear on which behaviors you will not tolerate in the workplace? Without a clear understanding of your organization's core values, it's impossible to embed effective diversity strategies into your systems and processes.

Failure to create accountability in your senior leadership team is yet another area that cultivates these excuses. Do your leaders have clarity on what is expected of them and what their role is in creating an inclusive workplace? Do they know what level of ownership they have?

Have resources been allocated? Commitment goes beyond words. We focus on the failure to allocate time, energy, and dollars, but the failure to allocate decision-making power is often overlooked. Without the ability to hold others accountable, your policies and procedures have no teeth.

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Doing "the right thing" is difficult when you don't have information to direct your actions. The excuses that leaders rely on also stem from a failure to obtain data and create achievable metrics. How do you know if the needle moved when you don't know where it was when you began?

The Framework of the Blueprint

I work to remove barriers and reduce bias as a mission, but my mission is only successful when yours is too. The blueprint I work from is my own strategy that, when applied across the commonalities of business, provides a place from which to measure how close you are to achieving your goal. In my experience working with thousands of employees at companies around the globe, I have encountered common themes, common challenges, and common solutions that run across industries, across company sizes, and across cultures.

The basic framework is the same for each organization, whether you have one hundred employees or one hundred thousand. Where the difference lies is in the implementation. With the opportunity to observe actions and behaviors, as well as to begin to recognize the mindsets that drive them, I have been able to classify companies into four main levels or phases: Awareness, Alignment, Action, and Advocacy.

The categories collectively characterize the practices, policies, and procedures that an organization needs to address and the order in which to do it. While the concepts around diversity and inclusion may come from a U.S.-centric lens, they are applicable globally. I also use the term "inclusive workplace" to refer to the concept that company

leaders must create a culture that is accepting of individual differences. However, when you consider the vast number of dimensions of diversity in the Four Layers model (see Figure 1.1), you can see they influence each other, which is why intersectionality is so important (but I'm getting ahead of myself). That convergence and influence of dimensions is what can make this work seem difficult, and as you'll hear me say repeatedly, "Complex doesn't have to mean difficult and it definitely isn't impossible."
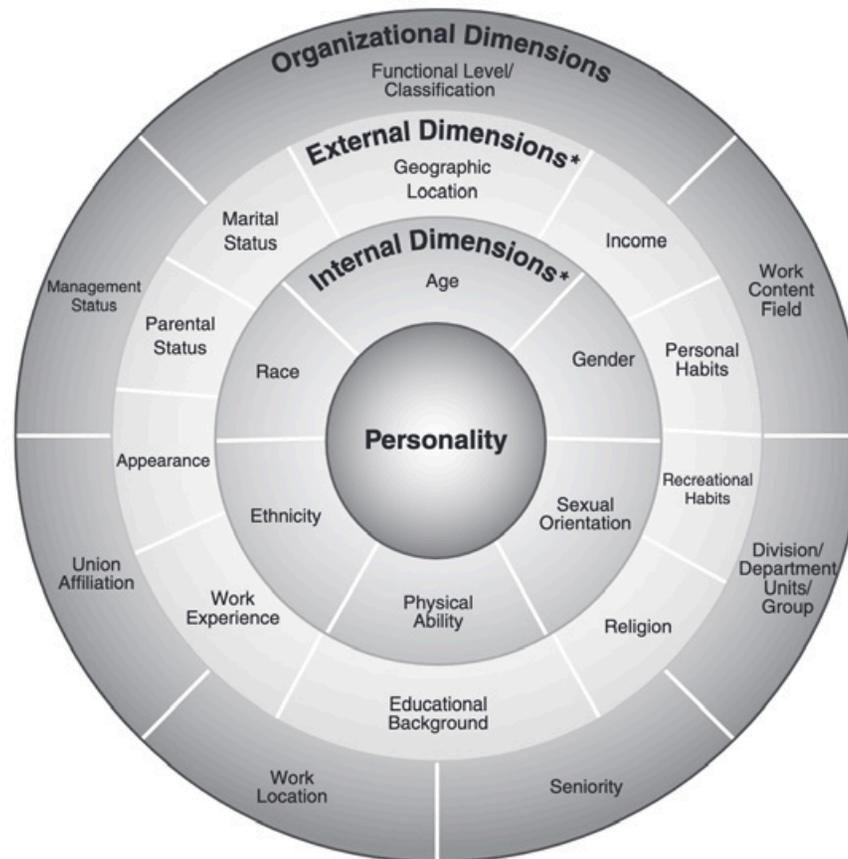
FIGURE 1.1 The Four Layers of Diversity.
Sources: Lee Gardenswartz and Anita Rowe, *Diverse Teams at Work*, 2nd Edition (Society for Human Resource Management, 2003); Adapted from Marilyun Loden and Judy Rosener, *Workforce America* (Business One Irwin, 1991).

You've probably also heard it said that you cannot have inclusion without diversity, but you cannot have an inclusive workplace culture without an organization that respects the diversity of the individuals, acknowledges the value that diversity brings to the organization, and actively works to ensure all employees within the organization are included in the practices, policies, and procedures of the workplace.

AWARENESS

The Awareness phase is the starting point for any organization's journey into diversity, equity, and inclusion. The goal is to become aware of the current state of your organization. It sounds much simpler than it is because this phase informs your strategy. It provides guidance and direction by surfacing the challenges to increasing diversity and creating inclusion while simultaneously offering evidence of what is working and what you should do more of.

The Awareness phase is the starting point for any organization's journey into diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Obtaining the data and the artifacts that will drive your pursuit of greater awareness can be done through several means. Surveys, focus groups, townhall meetings, feed-back/suggestion boxes, and interviews can be used independently or in concert with one another to create a robust vehicle for listening to your employees.

This phase is not all about data and metrics. In each phase, there is an overarching need for education and communication. When working to "wake up" your organization leaders and employees as a whole, transparency of decisions being made is just as important as requesting feedback, while foundational diversity, equity, and inclusion concepts help stakeholders begin to see how their participation, or lack thereof, impacts the overall strategy.

As a way of illustration, let's take a look at Lisa, a figurative CEO of a made-up tech company with 100 employees. Lisa and her counterparts in other departments have been given direction by their superiors to look into how diverse and inclusive their departments are. Lisa's first instinct is to reach out to Human Resources (HR) to get the demographic breakdown of her staff, assuming that boosting the number of underrepresented minorities should suffice to appease all parties. However, after a few minutes on the phone with the HR manager, she discovers that a handful of complaints regarding a hostile work environment have been filed anonymously and never addressed. Lisa realizes that she's going to have to dig a lot deeper to truly get a picture of how her department is doing and how to approach the damage that's already been done.

To completely move through the phases and reach Advocacy, this initial phase of Aware-ness makes it clear that diversity and inclusion within organizations does not only begin

by increasing the number of represented identities across gender, race, ethnicity, ability, and age. An organization must undergo a process to become diverse and inclusive, one that starts with assessing how they are practicing the key elements in those core concepts. These elements are found in the experiences of your employees and it is imperative they are captured through metrics, data, and other investigative tools.

Learning the state of your workplace culture provides you with a starting point to begin to answer the question of "How do we do this right?" Assessment of trust, communication, and other key elements that are the roots of diversity and inclusion will provide you and your organization with a place your leadership team can begin to align on future action.

ALIGNMENT

In the Alignment phase, your organization leaders will utilize the information provided in the Awareness phase, which provided clarity around the current state of the organization and start to align on the strategy. Determining the direction and agreeing to support the strategy is an important and fundamental factor.

In this phase, education is again present to reinforce the knowledge that diversity and inclusion within organizations does not only begin by increasing the number of represented identities across gender, race, ethnicity, ability, and age. It is understood that an organization must undergo a process to become diverse and inclusive, and it continues by assessing how key elements in those core concepts are being practiced. To do so, there must be a shared understanding of what diversity and inclusion is rooted in and how it is important for the organization.

After months of one-on-one interviews and focus groups, Lisa's HR team has gathered eye-opening, experiential data from her employees about the state of the organization. As she discusses her discoveries and proposed path forward with department managers, she learns that several of them felt the "diversity" assignment wasn't really a priority, that what mattered most was the optics of looking like they made an effort while still increasing the company's overall revenue. Lisa leaves the meeting frustrated and disappointed by the company's disjointed viewpoint.

The pillars of diversity and inclusion are held in the beliefs, actions, and practices of an organization, from employee to leadership. The objective of the Alignment phase is to educate everyone on the critical components of a diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace in order to practice and thus cultivate this in the organization. It is incumbent upon the leadership to authentically embrace this knowledge. To get the leadership team to buy in and commit to diversity and inclusion, the leaders have to align on the direction as well as the value to the company. Lisa and her team have a lot of meetings in their future because without alignment on the need to reach the goal, they have no hope of aligning on a strategy to achieve it. They have to help the leadership team see how unconscious bias is affecting each and every department and receive commitments to do something about it.

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One additional outcome of the Alignment phase is the setting of expectations. This phase creates accountability in leadership and demands action as a next step. Demonstrating support for the strategy provides clarity, as well as trust, to the workforce and sets the expectation that action will follow. Failing to move to the Action phase destroys the momentum that has been built, casts doubt on the data that has been obtained, and erodes trust in your leadership team.

ACTION

This phase is where everyone thinks they want to start because of its label. "Action" is what everyone wants to do, but what they actually mean by "action" is really only offering unconscious bias education. This phase requires actual action. This is where you do the work of reviewing and revising the practices, policies, and procedures of your organization and to do that, accountability, transparency, and authenticity will be required if the end result you seek is a truly inclusive workplace.

With her company's leadership finally aligned on its values and the import of a diverse and inclusive workplace, Lisa is now ready to start rocking the boat in her department. She begins by engaging the head of every department, from sales to research and development to marketing, to discuss ways to remove the barriers to true inclusion in their work environment.

Action means working to identify the places where bias and inequities continue to lurk. Upon discussion, there must be a deeper practice of inclusive leadership—role-modeling the action that will be required to be taken to do the work.

Action means dismantling the practice of only hiring individuals from Ivy League colleges. Action means reviewing compensation across your organization and paying women and men the same salary for the same job. Action means working with the architect to ensure the new office you're building will not just be ADA compliant, but accessible. Action is determining why 30% of your workforce is diverse yet every leadership role is filled by a white man. Action is understanding why, on average, women leave your company after five years; it means pinpointing the challenge and then actually fixing the issue.

ADVOCACY

Reaching the Advocacy phase is something not very many organizations achieve. Not because of the difficulty, but because of the prior stages. So many companies try to begin with the Action phase when they are actually in the Awareness phase. However, without knowing that, they apply task-oriented thinking to what should be strategic planning, resulting in an initiative that is short-lived, under-resourced, and without direction.

Lisa's department managers have finally bought into the value of a diverse and inclusive workplace as a result of upper management's valuation of its concepts. In turn, employees at all levels have begun to embrace the newly revised policies and procedures that address the unconscious bias we all harbor, remove the barriers the systems have created, and weave diversity and inclusion initiatives into the very foundation of the company and its mission. While she knows that her company, and the people in it, can never be completely bias-free, she is optimistic that the conversations will continue in a way that allows issues to be identified and addressed with more expediency.

In the phase of Advocacy, not only do you have current-state knowledge of your organization, with an understanding of where your organization is as it relates to foundational DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) concepts and metrics, but also you have grasped the "why" of moving forward along the path to becoming an inclusive organization. Your organization leaders understand, support, and have aligned on the strategy. They fully support the concept that diversity and inclusion within organizations is not only focused on the traditional notions of diversity. They have consistently reviewed and revised their practices, policies, and procedures and are role-modeling accountability, transparency, and authenticity. In the phase of advocacy, the cultivation of an inclusive workplace is reached when every person in the organization is working together to make sustainability of diversity and inclusion a priority.

There is no single "right thing" or "right way" to support diversity and create a culture of inclusion in the workplace. This framework provides a guide, and the various methods and recommended activities in my new book, *Unbias*, can be implemented in numerous configurations. **Don't get hung up on the definitions or the structure; instead focus on your strategy and successful attainment of your goal.** ▣

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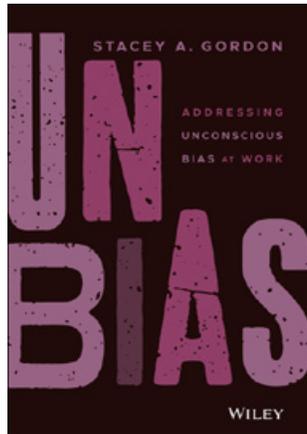
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Stacey Gordon is CEO of Rework Work, a company that helps employers dismantle hiring bias and guide candidates to the perfect role. Gordon is an innovative human capital strategist whose mission is to reduce bias in global talent acquisition and management. To that end, Gordon offers diversity, inclusion, and career-related online courses which have been viewed more than 1 million times. She was recognized by Pepperdine University as a Top 40 Over 40 Leader, was a finalist for *Los Angeles Business Journal*'s Women Helping Women Award and was recognized by *Forbes* as a Top 3 Business Leader Who Spoke Out About Diversity & Inclusion. In her capacity as a highly-rated coach, she is a member of Forbes Coaching Council and coaches D&I practitioners at The Forum on Workplace Inclusion.

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