

Summer 2019

Through the Lens of Sjöra

My family came from Sweden. We have a mythical legend called sjöra that warns of impending bad weather that will always bring the promise of renewal afterwards. One of the downfalls of summer is that we tend to get some severe storms here in Minnesota. They are quick and pass through like a tempest: strong winds, damaging hail and rain. It was the strong winds that were responsible for what we're calling our 'Culture Issue' for this edition of the Sand Paper.

We had a very scary looking storm pass through the Twin Cities almost two week ago. My family and I actually took refuge in the basement after the tornado sirens went off. Fortunately there was no tornado, but some very strong winds passed through and ended up knocking over a large tree in the neighbor's yard. The massive old oak ended up mostly in my driveway. I couldn't get my car into, or out of, my garage let alone have a clean dash to my front doorstep. I'd need to go talk to the neighbor; after all, it was *his* tree that fell in *my* yard, right? I was already kind of annoyed.

A lot of the families in my immediate block are Hmong. I don't know my neighbors very well but we're always civil, friendly waves during the sweeping pass of a lawnmower, that sort of thing. The fallen tree pretty much changed all that.

I went and knocked on his door. My neighbor, Josh, came out and we surveyed the mess in my driveway. We made introductions and small talk before he went back to his place to grab a chainsaw. He offered to start cleaning up the mess right then and there. I was so surprised at his enthusiasm that I went and grabbed my work gloves and off we went for an entire afternoon.

Josh would cut one of a hundred various sized limbs or branches and I would haul it away to the woodpile. It took us an entire day. What I didn't realize was that I was working on my "cultural agility" (a term that you'll see elsewhere in this issue). Josh shared things about his Hmong culture, upbringing; family history and how he came from Laos. It was fascinating to learn about how he struggled making friends in Minnesota when he moved here at a young age, the racism he experienced, the strange looks at grocery stores and the overall evolution of his culture and how they remain intact to the tenants of their own values and belief systems, while also adopting some American ones too. He called himself an 'American Mutt', and really, aren't we all in some way shape or form?

We're surrounded by it: Race, cultural identities, sexual orientation, work cultures, socioeconomic cultures and even age and generational cultures. This issue explores and challenges the thought of our own 'cultural agility' and seeks to enlighten in a small way the differences that all makes us, well, the same.

May your summer be filled with joy and bright light!

CAUTION! CULTURE WORK IN PROGRESS

By: Carol Nagele-Vitalis, M.A. Organizational Development



Positive work culture. We all want it, but how do we get it? Good news! Workplace culture is a continual work in progress; it is not the finish line of a race. This means you have an opportunity to participate in building and creating the kind of work place culture you want to be a part of every day.

Culture is the character and personality of your organization. When you look at the literature, there is a lot written about how leaders can shape culture in an organization. Overlooked are the employees' opportunities to shape their culture. What can you do to create a positive, diverse and inclusive place to work in?

Consider these questions:

- If you want to work in a positive atmosphere... do you bring positive energy to the office and share it with others? Or not?
- If you want inclusivity... how are you at reaching out? Are you asking questions that help you get to know others? How are you sharing part of your story so others can learn a bit about you?
- If you want an organization that asks your opinion and gets your input... when was the last time you asked colleagues/coworkers for input on your work or your communication style?
- If you want to be valued for your diverse opinion and skills you bring... are you actively seeking out people's opinions that are different from yours and gaining from their perspective?
- If you want to be part of a collaborative work culture... how do you engage with others on projects? Is it as a shared responsibility or can you feel your competitiveness creep in and take hold?
- If you want a culture of trust... are you being transparent and acting with integrity? Even when it is difficult? Or not modeled for you?

These questions are meant to get you started thinking about what you want to create in your workplace culture. Part of the human condition is to look outside ourselves for answers. Yet the only person we have control over is ourselves. There is a famous quote floating around that I think sums it up well enough "Be the change you wish to see."

Challenging Implicit Bias

By: Tisa Mitchell, MA

You are walking home. You are alone and it is dark. You come upon a group of what looks like teens at the upcoming intersection. The teens are becoming increasingly more rambunctious as you approach. At this point, our brains will automatically make a choice for us; carry on or cross the street.

Your choice has a lot to do with a something setting social research ablaze right now, implicit bias.

Also known as implicit social cognition, implicit bias refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner.

The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity explains these biases, which encompass both favorable and unfavorable assessments, are activated involuntarily and without an individual's awareness or intentional control. Residing deep in the subconscious, these biases are different from known biases that individuals may choose to conceal for the purposes of social and/or political correctness. Rather, implicit biases are not accessible through introspection.

In many cases, implicit biases keep us safe from harm and extend our production of new humans. Refer to the "flight or fight" our hunting and gathering ancestors faced.

In today's culture we are not faced with those same life threatening interactions on a daily basis, but our human need for survival is still very active. The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity goes on to say the implicit associations we harbor in our subconscious cause us to have feelings and attitudes about other people based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, age, and appearance. These associations develop over the course of a lifetime beginning at a very early age through exposure to direct and indirect messages. In addition to early life experiences, the media and news programming are often-cited origins of implicit associations.



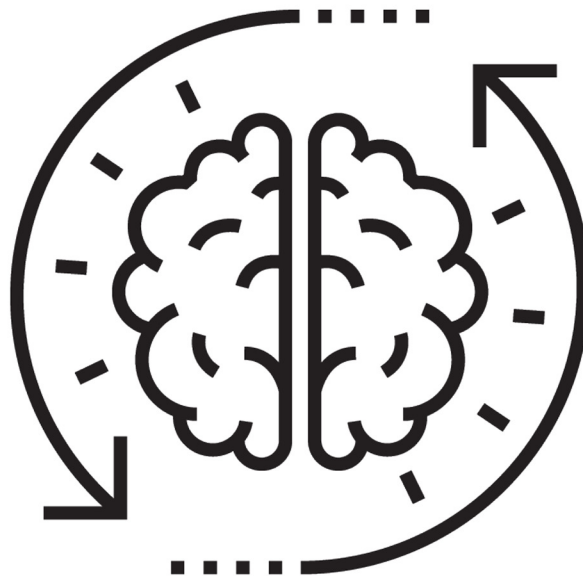
Challenging Implicit Bias, Continued.

Many people are completely unaware of the bias they may be holding. Completely eliminating any personal implicit biases is much easier said than done and may be impossible, but reducing bias can be an effective way to make yourself a better human overall. There are some key steps towards the journey to reducing your personal implicit bias that include knowledge, awareness, sensitivity, and lastly, action.

Digging that deep into your subconscious takes time and practice. Knowledge is power. The more you align yourself with facts and less with generalizations, stereotypes and assumptions, the greater your understanding will be when faced with interactions that may trigger some fragment of bias. Having the awareness to challenge your own thoughts of bias and those thoughts, feelings, actions, comments of others around you will continue to reduce the amount of bias you may harbor.

Increasing your sensitivity to exchanges, people, cultures, etc. outside your normal box welcomes respect, acceptance, empathy, and caring for others. Not that implicit bias keeps us from being sensitive, but the ability to view those same teenagers from the above scenario with more sensitivity could allow us to take the action of deciding to see them as simply teenagers and not a threat to our safety.

The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity is located at The Ohio State University.



DEAR SANDY,

I recently started working at a new job and have been there almost nine months. The majority of my coworkers have been here for many years, some even over twenty years. I was hired with the idea that my work experience would lend much value to what they are trying to do at my organization, however, I'm finding that the culture is one that is resistant to change. I feel like I'm not taken seriously, and when I suggest a new idea or process to make things more efficient, it feels like it falls flat. Do you have any insight on how to navigate a workplace culture that seems resistant to change?

DEAR NEW HIRE,

Thank you for the note. Your challenge is a common one. Organizations that are rich with experienced staff of many years oftentimes have built relationships and understanding with one another. It can be uncomfortable for a new person because you're not aware of the nuances and history that runs through the organization.

I have three words for you to think about as you manage this journey: Trust, Patience and Curiosity.

- Trust – keep in mind, you are just as new to them, as they are to you! When there are new faces put into a familiar work setting, it can be threatening, as sometimes people end up feeling territorial in their job functions. Another dynamic is the tendency to feel disruption in the work culture with a new personality that's in the mix. Questions like: “Do we include ___ at our meetings each week?” or, “Now that ____ is here, does this impact my role in any way?” It's incumbent on you to build trust with the folks that have been there for awhile.
- Curiosity – Be enthusiastic in your efforts to engage with your new workplace culture. Ask questions and get to know your coworkers, learn about their processes and insights as they are full of knowledge about how things function.
- Patience – This is likely the most important piece of the puzzle. You need to realize that fitting into a new culture takes time. In a way, it's like learning a new language! It takes practice and you have to apply it daily. Don't get frustrated if it's taking longer to feel part of the team than you expect. Things like this tend to happen in their own time.

Best of luck and happy summer!

Sandy



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651.430.3383 | 888.243.5744

www.sandcreekeap.com

About Sand Creek Workplace Wellness

Sand Creek specializes in providing exceptional workplace wellness services to support the human spirit at work. We embrace our core values of service, hope, trust, compassion, and wisdom in each interaction, thereby upholding our mission of providing helpful solutions to improve productivity and shining a light in the darkest of moments.

Our Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is designed to offer face-to-face counseling and consulting to those that voluntarily reach out to us. We are not simply a phone counseling service or online tool type EAP. Thousands of professional counselors form a worldwide Sand Creek network available to deliver personal care and support to you in your community. Our services are administered nationally, but delivered locally.

Sand Creek supports the relationship between individual health and overall organizational health. Our Organization Assistance Program (OAP) service extends the reach into the organization and provides work teams with a systemic approach to improve the health and well-being of an organization.