Diversity & Inclusion Matter

SUBTLE BIASES IN EVERYDAY INTERACTION: Five “Bias Interrupters” That Everyone Can Start Implementing Right Now

Below, we highlight five key ways individuals can help interrupt subtle biases that seep into daily organizational life. While involving everyone in these changes today can bring real change to technical workplaces, these bias interrupters (Williams, 2014) can be especially important for male or majority group allies to take on.

Tip 1: Ensure Productive Team Meetings Where All Employees Can Contribute.

The best meetings include a cacophony of voices. The tips below will help foster diverse voices and will go a long way to reducing stereotype threat and other subtle biases that lead some employees to being interrupted more often or not getting credit for their ideas.

- Solicit the opinion of quieter employees during the meeting or after the fact. Ask to hear from the quieter employees or approach them later to see if they had ideas they would like to share.
- Intervene when someone is being interrupted or not getting credit. Simply commenting along the lines of, “Let’s let ______ finish, and then we’ll come back to you” can make a big difference.
- Find a meeting ally who can support you and help notice subtle biases. If you are the person facilitating a meeting, it can be hard to keep track of all the contributions and directions. Invite a partner to be on the look out for tracking who has spoken, where ideas originate, who wanted to contribute next, and so on.

Tip 2: Listen for and Correct “Personality Penalties.”

As discussed in Chapter 4, subtle biases often result in women and people of color experiencing “personality penalties” more often than majority-group members. These include being labeled as “pushy, aggressive, or having a challenging personality” or being told that they could “tone it down a little” and “let others shine.” Watch out for instances where you may make these comments and intervene when you hear others make them. Ask questions like: “What do you mean by that exactly?” or “Do you think we might be operating on some hidden biases here?”

Tip 3: Share Your Stories to Enlist More Allies and Advocates.

Research shows that stories motivate people to act! Share your own experiences as a woman, member of an underrepresented group, or as a male or majority-group ally. While a business case may get allies theoretically on board with industry changes, it often takes personal stories to move people to action.

This is an excerpt from the NCWIT report, Women in Tech: The Facts. To view the full report, visit www.ncwit.org/thefacts.
**Stories Inspire Action**

Consider the following example from an interviewee in NCWIT’s study on male allies and advocates:

“When it finally started to hit me about gender diversity... We were in a big meeting and... she made a comment about how difficult it was for her to be a leader in the organization as a woman. And so, here is someone who I literally was putting on a pedestal saying this... And... was like, ‘Wow!’ So I asked her after the meeting... ‘Hey I want to go to lunch with you, I want to understand this!’

Hearing how this female colleague who he admired struggle with gender discrimination and biases made him want to understand how to promote change and sparked his ongoing role as a male ally.

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**Tip 4: Talk to Other Men (or Majority-Group Members) and Make it Okay to Make Mistakes.**

Anyone can do this, but it is often an easier task for male or majority group allies. Here are some ideas you might try:

- Talk about the kinds of challenges underrepresented groups encounter in IT.
- Share your personal experiences as a person in a minority position or talk about your experiences as a male or majority group ally.
- Discuss research findings about bias problems and change solutions.
- Remind men that we all experience unconscious bias and can work to challenge it, such as through sharing NCWIT’s unconscious bias video and debriefing after.
- Emphasize that it is okay to make mistakes and take risks to have a conversation. Sometimes people are afraid to have a conversation because they might “say something wrong” or “not get it all.” Endeavoring to have the conversation, even if it has awkward moments, is important when you are sharing experiences and research about problems and solutions.

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**Make it Okay to Make Mistakes and Learn!**

“Every person that becomes an advocate had to go through that door where they take the first risk and realize, ‘Oh, that wasn’t so bad.’ So I would talk about the risk-taking that you take the first or second time and how, all of a sudden, it is no longer risk-taking.”

Interviewee from NCWIT’s Male Ally and Advocate Research

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**Tip 5: Provide Legitimate Encouragement.**

Research shows that simply encouraging others to apply for a certain position or take on a certain role can go a long way toward mitigating stereotype threat. Such encouragement is important for all employees but is particularly important for minority members in a majority-group environment.

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