Gender Bias Is Still Holding Women Down In The Workplace



Many Canadian organizations have worked diligently to minimize gender discrepancies in hiring practices and employee wages. However, while the wage gap is closing, according to statistics from Stats Canada the gender wage gap continues to show women still earn less than their male counterparts, 0.82 cents for every $1 men earn.

Tackling issues such as the wage gaps, representation of women in senior positions and adding to the workplace landscape initiatives such as family accommodation requirements are beginning to address the workplace inequalities that have traditionally negatively impacted women's careers in Canada. Unfortunately gender equality remains a work in progress.

Hidden Gender Perception Bias At Work

In determining which employee will be rewarded with a recommendation for a great assignment, promotion, raise or bonus each employee's workplace performances and contributions are scrutinized and assessed at least partially by a supervisor or manager. However, it seems that not all of this scrutiny is equal in its application.

There is a growing body of research that suggests that performance and contributions of men and women, even those in the same jobs, teams and departments, are perceived differently. This appears to apply in particular to the feedback offered by a manager. New research from Stanford University's Clayman Institute for Gender Research demonstrated that female employees were much more likely to be given feedback that was different in focus from that of their male counterparts. For example women were evaluated poorly for 'coming on to strong' and their accomplishments more much likely to be attributed to a team efforts. This was in contrast to the feedback offered to their male counter-parts whose accomplishments were more likely to attribute to their own individual efforts.

In a similar survey of technology companies, conducted by Textio Inc., the results demonstrated the same gender bias. After analyzing hundreds of performance reviews Textio found that men were more likely to be given constructive suggestions related to specific skills, while women were more likely to get critical feedback to pipe down and be less aggressive.

These gender biases held true regardless of the gender of the person giving the feedback. The research suggests that perceptions people form about others' ability

and contribution is influenced as much or more by gender bias than by actual performance.

Unconscious Bias

While it is true that sometimes individuals hold conscious beliefs that one gender is superior to another in certain skills and abilities, frequently our biases are unconscious, hidden beliefs.

The team from Stanford have been analyzing language from hundreds of performance reviews and early results demonstrated that women received 2.5 times the amount of feedback men did about aggressive communication styles, for example, “your speaking style is off-putting’. Women were described as “supportive,” “collaborative” and “helpful” nearly twice as often as men, and women’s reviews had more than double the references to team accomplishments compared to individual achievements. Men’s reviews contained double the number of words related to assertiveness, independence and self-confidence—for example words like “drive,” “transform,” “innovate” and “tackle.” Men were also far more likely to receive feedback that linked their performance to a specific business outcome and their technical expertise.

It could be tempting to argue that perhaps the women were more supportive and helpful and men more innovative and had more drive. However, it appears that when women demonstrate drive they were told ‘not come on so strong’ and when innovation was displayed in conjunction with the women’s team’s success, the ‘success’ was attributed to the team and not the individual.

These unconscious biases can be far reaching and impact opportunities made available to women. When asked to pick between candidate profiles to replace a top performer 90% selected the profile of the candidate who was presented as demonstrating individual initiative, characteristics that appeared much more frequently in performance reviews for men.

Research also tells us that if we have an unconscious belief idea we are more likely to see evidence to support that belief whether or not it is actually present. In other words, if we expect women to be better supporting players we are more likely to identify their behaviours as supportive and criticize them when their behaviours do not fit our unconscious expectations.

Over Coming Unconscious Gender Bias in the Workplace

The good news is that research has also demonstrated that training people to be aware of unconscious bias can help overcome some of the inequity. In fact, several companies are trying to do better, for example Microsoft Corp. now requires all employees to participate in an annual training program to educate them about unconscious bias.

What can you do in your organization to minimize this unconscious bias?

1. Educate your supervisors and manages on techniques to make more mindful and conscious observations and decisions
2. In preparation for feedback or performance reviews remind managers/supervisors that unconscious bias exists
3. Provide examples of the gender-biased language so managers can learn and know what to look for such as
    1. Describing women in terms of their contributions to the team and referencing the achievement of the team and not their individual

achievements – words and examples that position women in primarily supporting roles
    2. Referencing luck, timing and other external factors when referencing women's contributions or achievements
    3. Reviewing negative references to attributes of aggression and elements of leadership to see if a double standard is being applied to men and women.
4. Review the performance reviews or other feedback from managers before they meet with their staff to identify gender biased language and messaging. Consider having a neutral 3rd party, for example HR, or language analysis software review the feedback to identify gender bias

Unconscious bias is not limited to gender bias but also to age, culture, disability and more and it can permeate co-worker relationships, the way individuals work with clients or customers and more. Providing all staff with training on the existence of their unconscious biases and teaching them to have more mindful and conscious perceptions can benefit the organization on many levels.