

The logo consists of the words "ASK YOUR TEAM" in white, uppercase, sans-serif font, arranged in three lines. This text is enclosed within a circular graphic that is orange on the left and right sides and black on the top and bottom, resembling a speech bubble or a stylized 'O'.

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Anonymity key to overcoming unconscious bias

Chris O'Reilly, AskYourTeam

Diversity and inclusion are priorities for every HR pro today, but too often we shy away from conversations about the biggest barrier to creating more inclusive organisations - unconscious bias. This article proposes a remarkably simple tool to tackle unconscious bias, but first we need to understand exactly what it is.

Unconscious bias is the great unsolved problem of modern HR and one of the intractable barriers to building a truly diverse organisation. Almost all people hold subtle biases based on gender, ethnic and other differences and we are surprisingly powerless to do much about it. Studies of gender bias in workplaces have provided some of the most powerful illustrations of just how pervasive

our unconscious biases are. Studies of gender bias in workplaces have provided some of the most powerful illustrations of just how pervasive our unconscious biases are.

Among the most compelling is a 2012 study by Yale University psychologist Victoria L. Brescoll into “volubility”, or how talkative people are in an organisational setting. Her findings supported what most of us would expect - that men speak more in business settings than women, and the more powerful the man, the more likely he is to speak.

Brescoll found that male CEOs were often the most vocal in the organisations they led. But when she applied the same filter to her female participants and looked for a correlation between power and the amount of talking, she didn't find one.

So she asked professional women and men to rate the competence of the male and female peers who spoke out more or less often. What she found explained the relative silence of powerful women and revealed a powerful unconscious bias against women who talk more in business. Interestingly, it was a prejudice held by both women and men.



Males who spoke up more often were perceived as 15% more competent than those who didn't by both women and men. Powerful women who spoke more than others were rated by both women and men as 14% less competent. When female CEOs are less vocal than their male peers, it's likely to be a well-learned survival mechanism.

To make matters worse, other studies have shown that awareness of a bias doesn't automatically mean it will be overcome. Indeed, often the opposite is true and awareness of a bias leads to its confirmation.

With studies like those as a backdrop, some predictable statistics were released on International Women's Day revealing the stagnant state of gender diversity in corporate New Zealand. Women make up only 18% of senior management teams at companies in New Zealand, a drop from 2016 and the worst result since the survey began in 2004.

It's safe to assume that the most often-heard voices in almost all New Zealand organisations are those of the dominant caste – older white men.

That's bad news, not just from the perspective of gender equality. It's also bad business. If an organisation listens to more diverse voices and ensures its leaders are more diverse, there is ample overwhelming evidence that they will perform better.

There is a growing body of research globally that supports this proposition: A 2007 study by Catalyst, a Canadian non-profit campaigner for gender equality in business found the Fortune 500 companies with the highest percentages of women directors out performed those with the least. On average, return on equity was 53% higher, return on sales 42% higher and return on invested capital 66% higher.

Similar research by Credit Suisse into corporate performance after the 2007-8 Global Financial Crisis, showed that post GFC share price recovery of companies that at least one female board member was 26% better than that of companies with no women on the board.



More recent studies have presented evidence that ethnic and racial diversity are as important as gender diversity in improving the performance of an organisation.

A 2015 McKinsey report on 366 public companies found that those in the top quartile for ethnic and racial diversity in management were 35% more likely to have financial returns above their industry mean, and those in the top quartile for gender diversity were 15% more likely to have returns above the industry mean.

There's no doubt then, that diversity and inclusion are good for business. But if the gender issue has taught us anything, it's that the road to becoming a truly diverse organisation is paved with many unconscious biases. Simply wanting to become more diverse is no guarantee that it will happen.





Perhaps the only proven way to overcome unconscious bias, is a healthy dose of anonymity. Anonymous listening is a technique that allows organisational architects to take the first step to building truly diverse organisational cultures.

One of the most famous success stories about anonymous listening comes from the rarefied world of elite symphony orchestras.

Fifty years ago, women were rarely seen in the world's top orchestras, despite making up more than half the students in elite music schools, and despite claims from the people who made hiring decisions that gender had no bearing on the outcome of the audition.

The solution came in the form of blind auditions. In the USA, the top five symphony orchestras had only 5% female players in 1970, but after blind auditions were introduced the numbers leapt quickly to 25% in the mid-1990s.

Today the gender balance in almost all elite orchestras is approaching 50-50. The lesson here is anonymity removes unconscious bias.

“Anonymous listening is the key to better quality decision making that is free from the prejudices we all hold to some degree.”



My own company AskYourTeam exists to help business leaders embed anonymous listening into their organisations. Our Continuous Involvement System is based on a comprehensive and anonymous survey of attitudes and opinions about how the organisation operates from every person who works for it.

The survey covers 13 different areas of business operation, from communication to strategy to operations, and collates a comprehensive dataset that provides an executive team with a to-do list for performance improvement.

It provides data that allows objective comparison between groups within an organisation, explains performance gaps and highlights pinpoint areas where executive attention will have the greatest impact on organisational performance.

Critically, a system like AskYourTeam removes the headwind of unconscious bias from executive decision making. It removes the opportunity for decision makers to incorrectly overvalue opinions because of the gender, age or ethnicity of the person who owns the opinion.

It also raises a critical question for every organisational leader today, without an anonymous listening system and an objective dataset, how can you be sure your decisions are not biased?



TALK TO ONE OF OUR TEAM MEMBERS AND FIND OUT MORE

Chris O'Reilly | Chief Executive

chris.oreilly@askyourteam.com | 021 777 721

Jude Manuel | Senior Partnership Manager

jude.manuel@askyourteam.com | 021 702 414

Paul Ardin | National Manager

paul.ardin@askyourteam.com | 021 751 939

Mike Russell | Wellington Manager

mike.russell@askyourteam.com | 021 702 080

Susana Leitao | Senior Partnership Manager

susana.leitao@askyourteam.com | 021 702 496

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