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INCLUSIVENESS STARTS WITH YOU

WE MAY BE PREJUDICED AGAINST CERTAIN PEOPLE AT WORKPLACE WITHOUT REALISING IT

By ELISA DASS AVIN
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MUCH has been written about diversity. Some organisations in developed countries promote diversity outwardly and tread carefully internally to avoid lawsuits on the matter, but that's not necessarily the case in Malaysia.

Many human resources (HR) leaders I speak to who want to create a diverse workplace tell a different, better story. They do it because they believe it's the right thing to do – in the spirit of *muhibbah*.

We are Malaysians after all, and we take pride in being a multicultural country, regardless of how the politicians and media might paint it. Yes, there may be a 'quota system' in some organisations here, but not in most. Needless to say, the organisational benefits of having a diverse workforce are not overlooked either.

However, good intentions don't always translate into good results. While HR and management may take the right steps to bring in skilled people of different gender, age and cultural backgrounds, strong retention is sometimes beyond HR's ability to effect.

In countries like the US, organisations report that many diversity training programmes have been conducted but they are not always successful. In Malaysia, 'Working With Different Generations' seems to be a popular training theme, but no substantial reports on positive outcomes have been heard thereafter.

We still receive complaints about Gen Y and the older folks. Why is that so? If processes and policies are made right and trainings are conducted, what's the missing link? In my humble opinion – it's the employees, i.e. you and me.

Take time to sit back and think of your biases. They can stem from our upbringing, past experiences or simply be 'borrowed biases' from the media or others.

You and I have big roles to play in ensuring workplace diversity is sustainable. Let me share with you a story, without prejudice.

There was a very dynamic department of 20 individuals. It is a predominantly Chinese team, with three individuals who had some Chinese ancestry via mixed marriages. (The whole organisation was, by and large, ethnically homogenous.)

A quick profiling shows that 90% of the team members are in their mid-20s to early 30s, from the city, and speaks better Cantonese than English. A small group were from Chinese vernacular school. Internal communications within the department is primarily in Cantonese, followed by English. It is a strong close-knit group that worked well together and delivered superb results.

A role opened up while the topic of diversity was hot in the air, and the head of department decided there was a need for someone with a Malay cultural background to meet the needs of their clients as well. And so a skilled Malay man from a small town was hired.

On Monday, I walked a very quiet man whose primary language was Bahasa Malaysia, and who appeared excited but lost on his first day. All of his

colleagues made an effort to say 'hi' and welcome him, then carried on with their work and casual departmental chats.

As the day went by, the new hire appeared more uneasy. He would lunch with his team, then head back to his desk while the noise and chatter continued in the office. Day two, three and four came and went as the new team member received work briefings and again lunched with the team. On day five, he didn't show. The following Monday, the team received news that he had resigned.

It didn't take long for the colleagues to conclude that he 'didn't fit in the department'. While they were all kind and decent individuals, there were just some implicit biases and habitual actions that didn't help welcome people of a different background into their team.

Unfortunately, this is not uncommon, even in Malaysia where most Malaysians strive to be accepting of others.

Mahzarin R. Banaji, a professor at Harvard and co-author of *Blindspot: Hidden Biases in Good People* discovered through her research that even the best among us have some implicit bias that needs undoing.

On what later became known as the Implicit Association Test, she states that "everyone carries with them implicit biases that may change how people perceive or interact with others. We are all subject to these biases, which can lead people to inadvertently act in ways that may be discriminatory or are influenced by stereotypes that people would consciously reject."

In other words, at a subconscious level, we may all tend to do some generalisation regarding various categories of people. We may not intentionally discriminate against others who are different from us or those in the 'out-group', but still our

actions or thoughts may sometimes make them feel unwelcome or small.

While these biases are neither deliberately damaging nor explicit, it can be easily picked up by someone who is already feeling out of place. As we build a genuinely diverse workplace where people of different genders, ages, educational backgrounds, languages and races come together, we need to put in some extra work beyond implementing procedures and trainings.

The following approaches can help welcome and sustain diversity in our teams or departments:

1 DISCOVER, UNDERSTAND AND OWN YOUR IMPLICIT BIASNESS

Most Malaysians do not consciously discriminate against others, but there is no denying that many of us were brought up observing and being influenced by discriminatory ideas and behaviours in parents, relatives, friends and the community around us.

Don't mistake your implicit bias against a certain race or gender as you being actively racist, sexist or ageist. You may currently be working with these people and are friends with them. But while you may not outwardly insult these colleagues, be on the lookout for small hints of bias in your actions, words or thoughts – especially involving those you have not built a close relationship with.

Take time to sit back and think of these biases. They can stem from our upbringing, past experiences or simply be 'borrowed biases' from the media or others. Think back to playtime when you were young or even when forming study groups in college. Were there people that you tried to avoid having as team members? Identifying the source or sources of these biases can help you understand yourself better and work towards countering your biases.

2 REFRAME IT AND RETHINK YOUR ACTIONS

Our implicit biasness results in our automatic responses. Bahaji shares that while we don't explicitly express our biasness, there is a high chance that "it shows up in our non-verbal behaviour: our expressions, our stances, how far we stand, how much eye contact we make". Because of this, there really is a need for us to make a conscious effort in reframing our thoughts and rethinking our expressions.

I would like to think that most of us have said this to ourselves at some point: "I love all people and treat them as unique individuals." However, let's be honest. Sometimes our actions and behaviours don't reflect that but we deny it and tell ourselves otherwise. Psychologists term it as cognitive dissonance when an individual experiences discomfort because their behavior is not in sync with their beliefs.

A simple example can involve a co-worker from Nigeria. Over the years, there is a strong label formed around Nigerians because of a few bad apples that have been caught in drugs, scams, and unruly behaviours.

As such, my Nigerian friends – who are honest and awesome to work with – have complained about how difficult it is for them to find jobs, local friends and sometimes a place to stay. But truth be told, even as an assessor – and I believe strongly that every individual is unique and we shouldn't generalise – the implicit biasness in me stopped me from befriending them initially. We stopped at courteous hellos. Prejudice happened without me realising it. But once that realisation dawned, I made an effort to get to know them on a more personal level and now, I am glad I did not stop at just hellos. These friends have been a great blessing to me and my family.

When cognitive dissonance takes place in this case, something else needs to happen. We change either our beliefs or our behaviour. Based on the above example, I decided to keep my conscious belief that every individual is unique and shouldn't be put in a box. So, I changed the behaviour that stemmed from my implicit biasness and saw great results arising from there.

If your thoughts need to be adjusted, do so. Reframe your thoughts and opinions regarding the groups of people you are likely to be biased towards.

3 TAKE SINCERE ACTIONS TO SUSTAIN DIVERSITY

A great piece of advice I have received in managing my own implicit bias is this simple yet impactful exhortation: "Be sincere in wanting to know and learn about a person you are unfamiliar with. Go beyond hellos and ask questions that will help you understand where this person is coming from and, through that, build a genuine relationship. And then, engage them!"

This rings true. Getting to know someone is one good way to repel our bias. But engaging them in team projects and organisation-wide projects will go a long way in making employees from minority groups feel welcome. Merely having lunches with them without engaging them is insufficient.

If actions are taken because 'management says so', the sincere efforts may not yield much benefit to you, your colleague or the organisation.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

Henry Ford said it well: "Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, working together is success." So while management and the HR team may take the first step by putting in processes to build a more diverse organisation, it really is up to you and me to make it a success!

MIND YOUR WORDS! THEY HAVE POWER

By SANDY CLARKE
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HUMANS apparently developed language initially as means to gossip – it allowed us to warn each other of people who would serve against our interests and those of the community.

Storytelling runs through the fabric of humanity; it's what distinguishes us as a species. Our capacity to not only think, but to know that we are thinking, has provided us with powerful imaginations that have seen us produce the world's most incredible innovations, as well as delivered its darkest hours.

The power of storytelling, of language, is so vast that it's impossible to measure. Doubtless we will all have read some book or watched a play or a movie that has moved us beyond the words that make them up.

Histories are created, whole worlds are made, philosophies and ideologies are sculpted, great love is sparked, and intense hatreds fuelled all due to the way in which words are built on top of each other.

Scott Friedman, Certified Speaking Professional, motivational humourist and former President of the National Speakers Association, is a highly sought-after motivational speaker who knows the power of language and the psychological shifts words can create. In the world of business, Scott believes that the words we use to define what we do can mean all the difference between celebration and dread.

An example he uses during his appearance on Leaderonomics' *Leadership Nuggets* series is a word anyone who's ever worked on a project before will be intimately familiar with: deadline. For Friedman – a multiple author of books focusing on engagement – the word *deadline* creates a sense of foreboding, "I don't want to achieve any objective with the word 'dead' in it!" Instead, he encourages us to use a substitute term: *finish line*.

As Friedman explains, "Finish line implies that when you get to the end, there's going to be some kind of celebration. The next time you hear the word 'deadline' or are about to say it yourself, turn it into 'finish line' and see if it feels a little different. And then, take responsibility when you do get there to acknowledge your success. Celebrate – have some fun with it."

Even a simple tweak in word use can have a profound effect on the outcome of a situation. When asked to justify a raise in their allowance, young people might shift from, "I did the dishes last week", to "I did the dishes *through* the whole of last week" to eke out a little more sympathy from their parents. Similarly, in leadership, feedback on ideas can be positively received if leaders swap their "but" with an "and". Consider the following two sentences:

"I get where you're going with your suggestion, *but* we just don't have time for it now."

"I get where you're going with your suggestion, *and* we can certainly consider it further at some point."

The first sentence, using the "but", slams the door shut on any further discussion, while the second sentence uses the "and" leaves the suggestion open for a future revisit. The leader might have no intention of revisiting; however, the way in which the feedback is delivered thanks to just one word makes all the difference to how it comes across.

The power of language can also be seen in sales. How many times have you received a cold call or an unsolicited sales pitch that looks to box you in almost immediately? It doesn't feel good at all, right? When the salesperson finally gets to their question, "Are you interested?" it gives you the chance to politely refuse and carry on with your day.

However, walking away becomes much harder when a slight change in the language invokes your moral values. Let's look at another couple of sentences:

"Are you *interested* in donating to the children's charity?"

"Are you *willing* to donate to the children's charity?"

While the first sentence enquires about your level of interest in helping out, the second sentence really puts you on the spot. You can be uninterested in helping a charity – it doesn't feel so bad, you will contribute next time. But the idea that you're *unwilling* to help those poor children in need is more likely to have you reaching for your wallet, lest you be seen on the same level as a Disney villain.

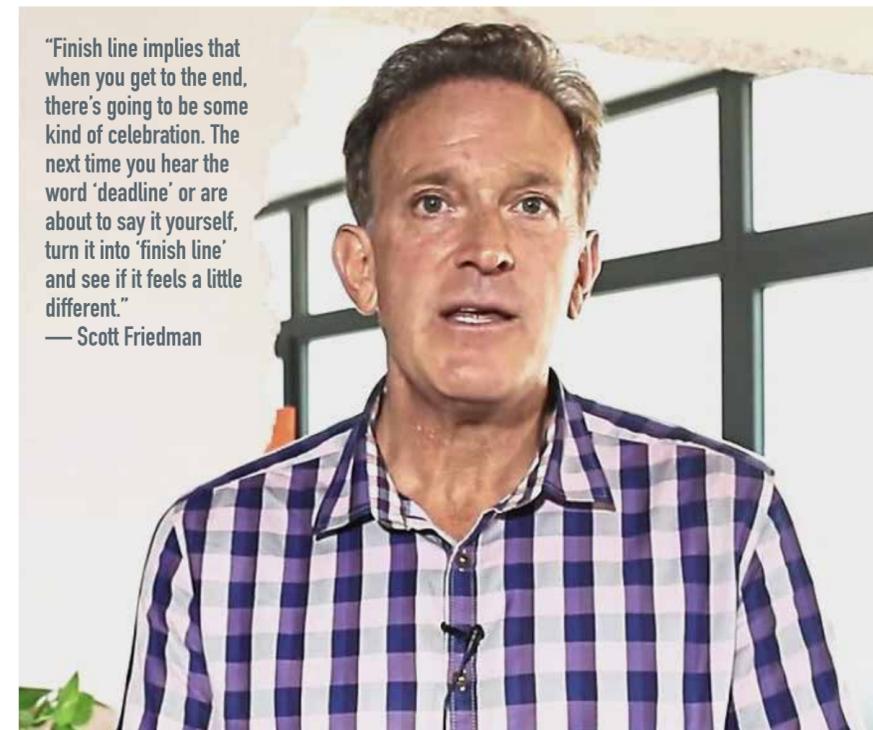
We've examined just a few simple examples of how effective language can be – it's easy to see how wordsmiths with insights into human psychology principles can use nuanced storytelling nudge us towards doing their bidding, be it a politician, boss, or advertiser.

And of course, the way we use language can have an enormous effect without us even realising – all the more reason to be careful of what we choose to tell ourselves, and how we interact with others.

■ Sandy is a huge fan of clever word play, and prefers when the power of language is used to make others laugh. P.G. Wodehouse once wrote, "An apple a day, if well aimed, keeps the doctor away."

To engage Scott Friedman for your organisation, e-mail us at info@leaderonomics.com and we can arrange for Scott to come to meet your employees and speak and inspire them.

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— Scott Friedman



■ Elisa is an Australia-based talent consultant for Inspired Minds and enjoys discovering the individuality of people and why they behave the way they do.