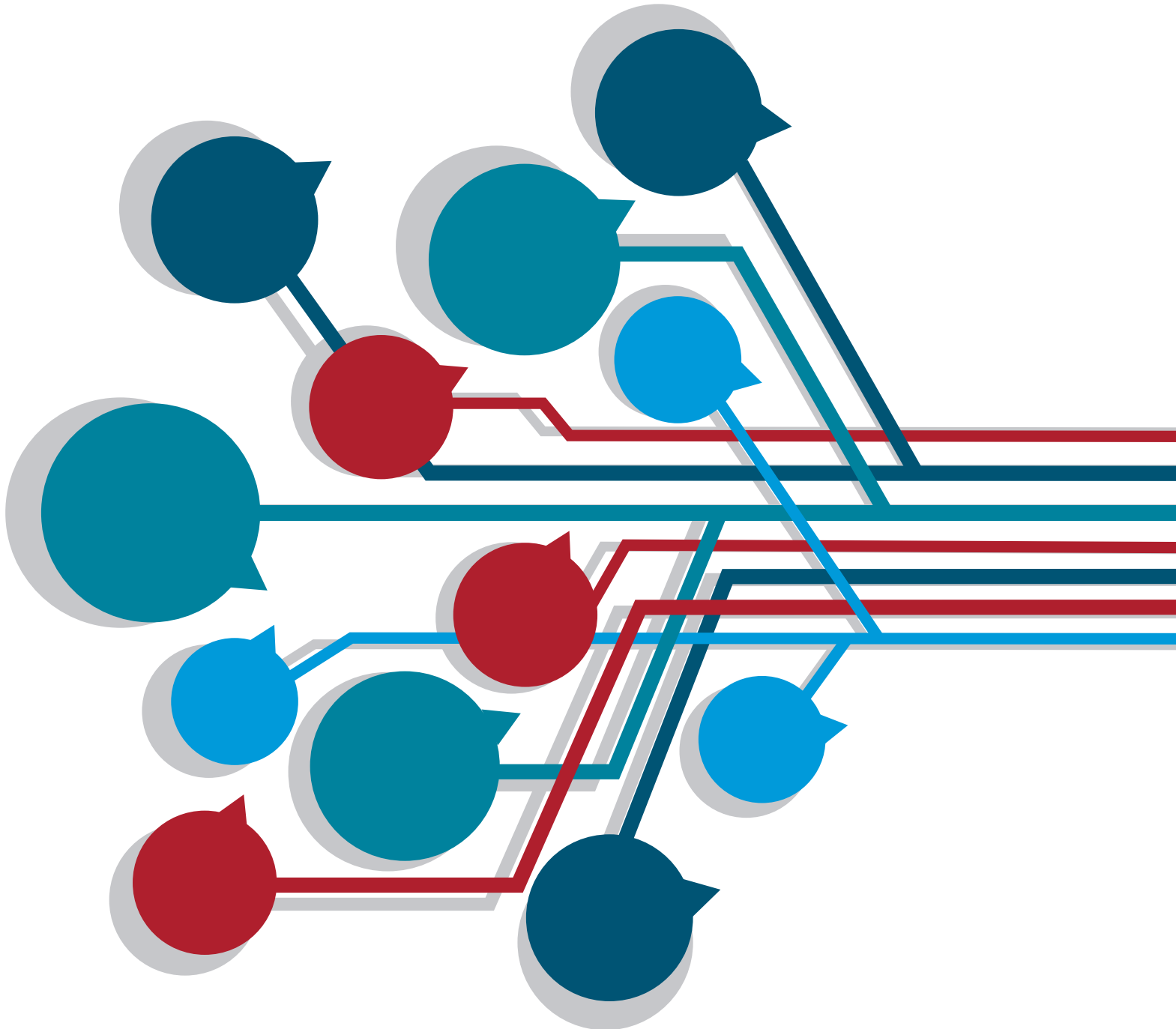




# NLI PERSPECTIVES

## Cultures of Inclusion



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# Toward Cultures of Inclusion



## *Why we're assembling these perspectives*

By Khalil Smith

Vice President, Consulting, NLI



## Foreword

What if there were a key that could unlock engagement, creativity, prosocial behavior, intelligence, and wellness in your organization?

There is such a key. The good news is that it's been under our noses all along. And the bad news is that it's been under our noses all along.

That key is inclusion.

Only recently have we acquired the tools and knowledge to understand what we were missing by using people's hands but not listening to their voices — soliciting their labor, but not their ideas.

The nature of work has shifted. Manual labor has largely given way to knowledge work. Converging trends of globalism, remote work, outsourcing, and the gig economy have afforded workers greater choice and employers greater competition. With this mobility, diversity itself won't ensure optimal outcomes. Without inclusion, diversity means a revolving door of talent.

At the NeuroLeadership Institute, we're committed to equipping organizations with the tools they need to make inclusion part of their culture. That's why we assembled these resources — to educate leaders and individual contributors about the benefits of inclusion. In the pages that follow, you'll find articles that highlight the challenges of inclusion, the dangers of overinclusion, and the connections between inclusion, diversity, and bias.

To be clear, the work on diversity isn't done. But when organizations embrace diversity without also pursuing inclusion, they wind up with workers who never quite feel accepted, supported, or empowered — and thus turn over rapidly. Powered by engagement and innovation, organizations leading the inclusion revolution will be ready for the next phase of growth, the next great product, the next emerging market.

At NLI we define culture as the shared everyday habits of an organization. A culture of inclusion is one in which the habits of inclusion are not just demonstrated by some of the leaders some of the time, but by all employees all the time. And that requires deliberate attention to the social drivers of threat and reward, a knowledge of what creates employee engagement, and a relentless focus on the experience of each individual.

It's not just offering seats at the table — it's lifting voices to sing.

# Why Our Brains Fall for False Expertise, and How to Stop It



*Once we are aware of the shortcuts our minds take when deciding who to listen to, we can take steps to block those shortcuts*

By Khalil Smith

**strategy+business**

At the beginning of every meeting, a question hangs in the air: Who will be heard? The answer has huge implications not only for decision making, but for the levels of diversity and inclusion throughout the organization. Being heard is a matter of whose ideas get included — and who, therefore, reaps the accompanying career benefits — and whose ideas get left behind.

Yet instead of relying on subject matter experts, people often pay closest attention to the person who talks most frequently, or has the most impressive title, or comes from the CEO's hometown. And that's because of how our brains are built.

The group decision-making process, rather than aligning with actual competence, habitually falls for messy proxies of expertise, a phrase coined by University of Utah management professor Bryan Bonner. Essentially, when our brains are left to their own devices, attention is drawn to shortcuts, such as turning focus to the loudest or tallest person in the room. Over time, letting false expertise run the show can have negative side effects.

"The expert isn't heard, and then the expert leaves," Bonner said in an interview with the NeuroLeadership Institute, where I head the diversity and inclusion practice. "They want to realize their potential. [If] people can't shine when they should be shining, there's a huge human cost."

If the people who offer the most valuable contributions to your organization aren't appropriately recognized for it, they won't stay long. Or, possibly worse, they will stay and stop trying. As my mother was fond of reminding me when I got my first management role: "When people can't contribute, they either quit and leave or they quit and stay."

One of the most important assets a group can have is the expertise of its members. But research indicates that even when everyone within a group recognizes who the subject matter expert is, they defer to that member just 62 percent of the time; when they don't, they listen to the most extroverted person. Another experiment found that "airtime" — the amount of time people spend talking — is a stronger indicator of perceived

influence than actual expertise. Our brains also form subtle preferences for people we have met over ones we haven't, and assume people who are good at one thing are also good at other, unrelated things. These biases inevitably end up excluding people and their ideas.

In recruiting, management scholars have found that without systemic evaluation, hiring managers will favor and advocate for candidates who remind them of themselves. This plays out in meetings, too, where diversity goals can be undermined by these messy proxies to the extent that we use proxies that hinder particular groups: Height gives men and people from certain nations (whose populations tend to be taller) an advantage, and loudness disadvantages introverts and people with cultural backgrounds that tend to foster soft-spokenness. This phenomenon applies to both psychological and demographic diversity.

People are not naturally skilled at figuring out who they should be listening to. But by combining organizational and social psychology with neuroscience, we can get a clearer picture of why we're so habitually and mistakenly deferential, and then understand how we can work to prevent that from happening.

## How Proxies Play Out in the Brain

The brain uses shortcuts to manage the vast amounts of information that it processes every minute in any given social situation. These shortcuts allow our nonconscious brain to deal with sorting the large volume of data while freeing up capacity in our conscious brain for dealing with whatever cognitive decision making is at hand. This process serves us well in many circumstances, such as having the reflex to, say, duck when someone throws a bottle at our head. But it can be harmful in other circumstances, such as when shortcuts lead us to fall for false expertise.

At a cognitive level, the biases that lead us to believe false expertise are *similarity* ("People like me are better than people who aren't like me"); *experience* ("My perceptions of the world must be accurate"); and *expedience* ("If it feels right, it must be true"). These shortcuts cause us to evaluate people on the basis of proxies — things such as height, extroversion, gender, and other characteristics that don't matter, rather than more meaningful ones.

The behavioral account of this pattern was first captured by breakthrough research from Daniel Kahneman and the late Amos Tversky, which eventually led to a Nobel Prize in Economic Science for Kahneman, and his bestseller *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. Their distinction between so-called System 1 thinking, a "hot" form of cognition involving instinct, quick reactions, and automatic responses, and System 2 "cool" thinking, or careful reflection and analysis, is very important here. System 1 thinking can be seen as a sort of autopilot. It's helpful in certain situations involving obvious, straightforward decisions — such as the ducking-the-bottle example. But in more complicated decision-making contexts, it can cause more harm than good — for instance, by allowing the person with the highest rank in the meeting to decide the best way forward, rather than the person with the best idea.



*Although we humans may have biased brains, we also have the capacity to nudge ourselves toward more rational thinking.*

### **Taking Steps to Combat Your Own Decision-Making Bias**

Given the extent to which Western business culture puts a premium on individualism and fast decision making, it's understandable that so many people have been trained to go their own way as quickly and confidently as possible. The good news is that with the right systems in place, people can be trained to approach problem solving in a different, less bias-ridden way.

Although we cannot block a biased assumption of which we are unaware, we can consciously make an effort to direct our attention to the specific information we need to evaluate, and to weigh it consciously. Just about any sort of decision can get hijacked by mental shortcuts, so it's useful to have a few tools to nudge yourself and others toward more reflective, rigorous, and objective thinking.

**Set up "if-then" plans.** To guide attention back from these proxies of expertise, you can formulate "if-then" plans, which help the anterior cingulate cortex — a brain region that allows us to detect errors and flag conflicting information — find differences between our actual behavior and our preferred behavior. By incorporating this type of bias-mitigation plan before we enter into a situation where we know a decision will be made, we increase our chances of making optimal decisions.

For example, you can say to yourself: "If I catch myself agreeing with everything a dominant, charismatic person is saying in a meeting, then I

will privately ask a third person (not the presenter or the loudest person) to repeat the information, shortly after the meeting, to see if I still agree.”

**Get explicit, and get it in writing.** One fairly easy intervention is to instruct employees to get in the habit of laying out, in writing, the precise steps that led to a given decision being made. You also can write out the process for your own decision making. For example, narratives in the form of “We decided X, which led us to conclude Y, which is why we’re going with strategy Z” bring a certain transparency and clarity to the decision-making process and serve as a record that can be referenced later to evaluate which aspects of the process worked and which didn’t.

**Incentivize awareness.** Along those same lines, managers should reward employees who detect flaws in their thinking and correct course. At the NeuroLeadership Institute, we have a “mistake of the month” section in our monthly work-in-progress meetings to help model and celebrate this kind of admission.

To use a sports example, New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady reportedly pays his defense if they can intercept his passes in practice. (It must help. He’s one of two players in NFL history to win five Super Bowls.) The takeaway: By making error detection a team sport, you destigmatize the situation, highlight the learning opportunities, and increase the likelihood of making better decisions in the future.

**Set up buffers.** Taking your decision making from “hot” to “cool” often requires a conscious commitment to create a buffer between when you receive information and when you make a decision on how to move forward. For example, before a big decision is officially made, everyone involved should be encouraged to spend 10 minutes relaxing or going for a walk before reconvening one last time to discuss any potential issues that haven’t yet come up. This is a way of “cooling off” and making sure things have been thought through calmly. Another way to accomplish this is to engage in a “pre-mortem” — imagining a given decision went poorly and then working backward to try to understand why. Doing so can help identify biases that might otherwise go undetected.

**Cut the cues.** The most common and research-backed approach involves giving hirers access to fewer of the sorts of cues that can trigger expedience biases. Blind selection is a classic example. In the 1970s and 1980s, top orchestras instituted a blind selection process in which the identity of applicants was concealed from the hiring committee, often by literally hiding the player behind a screen while he or she performed. As a result, the number of female musicians in the top five U.S. symphony orchestras rose from 5 percent in 1970 to more than 25 percent in 1996.

Bonner, the Utah psychologist, says to “take the humanity out” when you can. “Set up situations where people exchange information with as little noise as possible,” he says. If you’re brainstorming, have everyone write down their ideas on index cards or on shared documents, then review the ideas anonymously — that way the strength of the idea, rather than the status of the source, will be the most powerful thing.



Technology can also be leveraged. For example, the “merit-based matching” app Blendoor strips the name, gender, and photos of an applicant from a recruiter’s view, and Talent Sonar uses predictive analytics to shape job listings that attract both male and female candidates, and performs a blind resume review, which leads to a 30 percent larger hiring pool, the company says.

Biases are human — a function of our brains — and falling for them doesn’t make us malicious. We have the capacity to nudge ourselves toward more rational thinking, to identify and correct the errors we make as a result of bias, and to build institutions that promote good, clear thinking and decision making. With the right systems, tools, and awareness in place, we can better cultivate the best ideas from the most well-suited minds. It just takes a bit of effort, and in the long run pays off in big ways. The best ideas get a chance to be heard — and implemented — and your best thinkers are recognized and keep on thinking.

### Note

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# Diversity Makes Inclusion Harder, But Here's What To Do About It



*It sounds like an impossible paradox: How do you create one big in-group without downplaying difference? These researchers believe they've found a way*

David Rock & Khalil Smith

**FASTCOMPANY**

Good-faith attempts to champion diversity often backfire for a pretty intuitive reason: The more an organization points out the differences among employees — even in order to celebrate them — the more likely it is that some employees will feel less included, and behave accordingly. The fact is, our brains have been fine-tuned over eons to become amazingly efficient at noticing differences. It's not just gender or ethnicity, either. Out-groups form even when people are asked to wear red or blue t-shirts.

Couple that sensitivity to difference with the human need for fairness, and you may also get dominant groups feeling neglected. Such is the argument some white men in Silicon Valley are making — that diversity efforts amount to discrimination. Indeed, when we asked over 200 diversity and inclusion (D&I) professionals at a recent event about their biggest worry over the next five years, the top answer was backlash against their efforts.

Diversity makes inclusion harder; it's easy to welcome different perspectives when the people sharing them are all mostly the same age, gender, went to the same schools, and crack the same jokes. But when people of truly diverse backgrounds are thrust together, it gets a lot harder. The real challenge, when it comes to building work cultures that are both diverse and inclusive, is to leave ample room for difference while still thinking like — and identifying as — one big in-group.

## Overcoming out-grouping

Diversity efforts don't always account for the long-established psychological tendency toward "out-grouping" and its frequently unproductive consequences.

A 2015 review in *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* found that efforts to celebrate differences can lead non-dominant members feeling uncomfortably aware of their group identities. What's more, that can also



*Diversity efforts don't always account for the long-established psychological tendency toward "out-grouping"...*

leave them feeling like positive group attributes are being imposed on them, leading to a sense that they're actually being miscategorized or "just don't fit." In experiments conducted in both simulated and actual work environments, some multicultural efforts led to perceptions of exclusion in dominant-group members. The important exception: if inclusion efforts were framed as benefitting and addressing everybody, resistance was reduced.

In other words, organizations may want to consider flipping the way they think about inclusivity. In our research covering 42 of our client organizations across seven countries, just 43% of D&I programs described by interviewees were universally offered to everyone, and just 19% of companies intentionally included white males in conversations about diversity and inclusion. That's a mistake. Rather than focusing just or mainly on giving diverse team members extra visibility that risks fracturing the overall team, leadership and staff should strive to unite people. They should highlight similarities and remind team members that there is no "us" versus "them" — only one big "us," no matter what our differences might be.

This isn't just semantics, and it's not about minimizing diversity. It's emphasizing universally inclusive practices, like parental leave offered regardless of gender or sexual orientation. Same goes with flexible work arrangements, which serve people in many different ways when they're made available to everyone: They can reduce headaches for parents, caregivers, those with mobility challenges, and mega-commuters alike. These "for-everyone" policies don't efface differences, they support them.

## Mitigating the risks, amplifying the benefits

Inclusive programs, framed in ways that promote an organization's values and benefit everyone, can be considered "superordinate goals" that unify people across group divisions. These goals are higher-order missions shared by multiple people, with rewards bestowed on everyone involved. (Science fiction frequently employs a big, scary superordinate goal as a narrative device: the aliens come to earth, and humanity suddenly gets along.) Superordinate goals support inclusion efforts because they get people thinking in terms of others' skills and value — not their appearance, beliefs, or status.

We're not saying that all employee resource groups should be banned, or that programs that benefit a single group should be done away with. There are times when institutional asymmetry — much like structural inequality in the broader society — has to be addressed head-on. When people are being paid less based on gender, when a certain demographic is being hired in paltry numbers, and when promotions only go to those who fit a certain mold, there's no substitute for direct action.

Nevertheless, we counsel our clients to understand the detrimental side effects that may follow those same, totally necessary actions. Every leader needs to be able to make important trade-offs, but charging ahead with difference-focused initiatives without understanding the risks involved won't help an organization move in the right direction.

As we've studied organizations that are relatively more mature in their D&I efforts than others, one thing we've found is that difference-focused initiatives are more necessary in less mature cultures — the ones featuring large disparities between those in dominant and non-dominant groups. But the more diverse and inclusive a culture becomes, the more those gaps fade; before long, there aren't seriously underrepresented groups in the organization anymore. And whenever other disparities are uncovered, they can be addressed in more targeted ways. If you can create one large in-group, you can mitigate the risk of stereotyping and other biases.

# Approaching Diversity with the Brain in Mind



*Leaders may think awareness programs are suitable for quelling unconscious bias, but they are just the start*

By Khalil Smith & David Rock

**strategy+business**

The concept of unconscious bias, percolating for years now, is becoming better established, thanks in large part to a wave of scientific research. Every week, it seems, a study or book comes out that offers new and important insights about the subtle ways human beings discriminate against one another, robbing certain groups of important opportunities and depriving institutions of the skills that members of these groups possess.

At the NeuroLeadership Institute, we use cognitive science to help clients solve organizational problems, closing the divide between what's known about a topic from the research literature and what conventional wisdom leads businesses to do. Bias and how to effectively mitigate it represents such a gap — a gap that amounts to a mass misunderstanding of the science of behavior change, which is part of why so many bias interventions are ineffective.

This international discussion about unconscious bias is undoubtedly good. After all, there's solid empirical evidence that a sizable chunk of discrimination in society is, in fact, unconscious — just look at studies of the different response rates for resumes with "black" versus "white" names. It's unlikely these disparities can be entirely attributed to conscious bias, given that 2015 survey research showed solid majorities of white U.S. residents saying they would vote for a black president (a rough but useful proxy for their willingness to hire black candidates for other, less prestigious positions) and showed that only a very small faction believed in inborn differences between black and white people.

The interest in raising awareness of — and making commitments to mitigate — unconscious bias is accordingly large. Since its launch in 1998, the Implicit Association Test, which purports to reveal an individual's level of unconscious bias, has been taken more than 20 million times, with an uptick in recent months. Further, in June 2017, CEO Action for Diversity & Inclusion was formed, a major initiative under which chief executives promised to "implement and expand unconscious bias education," among other commitments. Since then, more than 400 organizations, from a wide range of industries, have signed on to the pledge. Many high-profile companies beyond those that have taken the pledge have also been outspoken about unconscious bias.

## Awareness Isn't Enough

But if you're judging your company's diversity and inclusion efforts on whether education programs merely exist, you're probably doing it wrong.

The trend toward talking openly about unconscious bias — prioritizing awareness through HR initiatives such as printing posters, giving presentations, and administering tests — brings with it the major risk that CEOs, managers, recruiters, and others will assume awareness is enough to solve the problem. It isn't.

For many diversity efforts, raising awareness is assumed to be the natural solution. After all, making diversity a priority feels tangible. Pulled in by that immediacy, organizations focus on the prioritization rather than the hard work of behavior change — an approach that's amorphous, complicated to implement, and difficult to measure. But without the behavior-change work, companies get stuck in a loop of initiative, priority, fatigue, and irrelevance. Rinse and repeat.

The most important finding here is a broad one: For decades, psychologists and political scientists have looked for evidence that educating people about certain issues causes them to act differently. Again and again, on public health issues such as antismoking and antidrug campaigns, they've come up empty. People smoke despite knowing the risks of tobacco use. Kids exposed to D.A.R.E., which was for decades the U.S. government's preferred drug awareness program, aren't really any less likely to try drugs.

One University of Michigan health professor put it this way in 2014: "We've known for over 50 years that providing information alone to people does not change their behavior." The same logic applies to unconscious bias. If anything, the problem is bigger in this domain, as the underlying behavior is necessarily unconscious. And yet there's a widespread belief that teaching employees and managers about unconscious bias will lessen it. Very little evidence supports that case.

## Change the Outcome

From a neuroscientific perspective, none of this should come as a surprise. Unconscious biases occur as a result of brain processes that aren't consciously accessible, so it's only natural that talking and thinking about them doesn't really change anything. Of course, education and awareness efforts can get us to think more about diversity and inclusion, and can spark interest in addressing those goals, but they aren't enough to change the unconscious processes that lead to bias in the first place.

Asking what can change these processes might be the wrong approach. The better question: How can companies change *outcomes*? And the answer comes down to changing behavior.

The critical insight we have gained is that beyond trying to help individuals become less biased, you need *teams* to take less biased *actions*. And because you can't see it yourself, you need a teammate to help you see it — and mitigate it.



*If you're judging your company's diversity and inclusion efforts on whether education programs merely exist, you're probably doing it wrong.*

To put that concretely, the habit we most want to see is people catching bias in real time. That requires sharing two things: knowledge and language. The shared knowledge is that *everyone* perceives the world through filters — if you have a brain, you're biased — and thus it doesn't mean something is terribly wrong with you when you exhibit biases. The language is a way of speaking and a vocabulary that allow for these conversations to happen in real time. "Hey, I'm noticing that your first choice to fill this position is a candidate who went to the same university as you," such a conversation may begin. "Perhaps similarity bias may be at play here?" In our work with a global financial-services company, we found that of 214 participants, a full 85 percent discussed biases at work two weeks after being trained to identify them. Give people the right words, and they'll use them.

Structural approaches help, too. In 2014, Intel began to require at least two women or members of underrepresented groups on the panels for new hires. Diversity quickly increased: That year, almost a third (32 percent) of new hires were women or people of color; in 2016, it was 45 percent. What's striking about this kind of preventative measure is that it didn't target unconscious bias within an individual, but within a process.

The right systems, in other words, can help drive down bias at an organizational level. Concrete rules such as "We will not hire for a position until we have posted it for at least 30 days to a job board geared to minority candidates" or "We will blind ourselves to candidates' names, schools, and social affiliations (e.g., fraternities or sororities) until the interview stage" will always be more effective than education and awareness campaigns at bolstering diversity and inclusion efforts. These systems can be seen as

nudges ensuring a more even playing field. If they're combined with raised *priorities* for diversity and inclusion as well, that's even more effective.

Addressing bias involves behavior change, not merely awareness. Is the percentage of minority applicants and new hires actually going up? Are members of traditionally underrepresented groups being promoted to management positions at the same rate as members of other groups? Are you getting more equitable across your organization? These are tough questions, the answers to which companies might not like. It's understandable, then, that it's so common for companies to tout an increase in awareness and education statistics as goals in themselves. But even the best awareness-raising attempts won't bear any fruit until they are tethered to real, specific policy changes within an organization — and to honest attempts to measure outcomes worth measuring.

### Note

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# It's Possible (and Dangerous) to be Over-Inclusive



*Everybody doesn't  
have to be on  
everything*

By Khalil Smith,  
Heidi Grant & Kamila Sip

## QUARTZ

Organizations have rightly started making diversity and inclusion top priorities. And accordingly, managers have become more sensitive about who they hire, promote, and assign to projects. They've also become more sensitive to sharing information equitably among their staff, and worked harder to give people the right amount of exposure within the department or organization.

This progress is massive, but it has left some collateral damage — namely, wasted time, money, and energy due to a hidden drain on productivity: over-inclusion.

By looping in too many people to various emails, meetings, and projects, organizations risk job satisfaction, retention, and both the quality and timeliness of employees' work. In order to avoid these pitfalls, leaders must master the art of expectation matching in order to more thoughtfully exclude.

### Over-inclusion, defined

We can think of inclusion as following an inverted U-shaped curve. That is to say, too little inclusion is a problem, such that we can reasonably call it "under-inclusion." This is what we're most familiar with: the feeling of being left out, minimized, or excluded.

Then there is the ideal amount of inclusion. It's when the right people know the right information at the right time. Over-inclusion is being a touch too attentive. It's the meeting where two or more people's contributions are redundant. It's getting copied on an email thread with a million other people and having no real idea who is meant to do what.

Multiplied over many meetings, emails, and projects, hitting deadlines and moving processes along becomes a struggle. It's bureaucracy gone digital.

### The costs of over-inclusion

Over-inclusion is a textbook case of good intentions paired with bad instincts.

Humans are social beings and want to feel a sense of belonging. Research has even shown the profound impacts social inclusion and exclusion have on how our brains function, suggesting a feeling of belonging is actually vital for survival. Such a legacy has made us acutely aware of other people's social needs, such as relatedness, status, and fairness. These domains affect how people feel rewarded or threatened by in social situations. They also, by extension, affect our unconscious responses and performance.



*The way to do this is  
deceptively simple:  
Match expectations  
by communicating  
effectively.*

When we include people in emails, meetings, and projects, we're partly appealing to this set of empathetic impulses. (We're also just trying to get things done.) But it's those same impulses that lead us to over-include. As a result, people may burn out because of overwhelming cognitive load and decision fatigue. And they may develop unhealthy, "always-on" mentalities toward their work.

Something has to give.

### **How to thoughtfully exclude**

The antidote to over-inclusion is thoughtfully excluding: removing people from threads, meetings, and projects in ways that don't undermine all of the hard work you are doing to mitigate bias and increase diversity.

The way to do this is deceptively simple: Match expectations by communicating effectively.

Managing and reconciling expectations matter for the brain. Specifically, one region of the brain known as the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) in part detects conflicting information, both from our environment and in social interactions. It's the ACC that causes us to pause when our favorite coffee shop is suddenly closed, or when an apparent ally turns on us.

When the brain is tasked with resolving these kinds of conflicts, it deploys huge cognitive resources to tackle the task. Since the brain only has a finite amount of energy, it's important to minimize how often expectations are violated, so it can conserve juice for bigger decisions.

In practice, this could mean launching a project by specifying who is involved to what degree and for what role, along with who isn't involved and why not. Have that conversation with all parties to ensure your expectations for each person's role align with their expectations for their role. That investment up front can pay huge dividends in ensuring the right people are involved, the right people are not involved, and everyone accepts where they fit into the scenario.

The result of deliberate, optimized inclusion is faster and more accurate decision-making and fewer hurt feelings. What's more, those who were once unnecessarily included are now freed up to redirect and reinvest their cognitive energy.

# Leaders Should Be Striving Toward “Optimal Inclusion” — Here’s Why



*The right perspectives  
at the right time*

By Khalil Smith



Most leaders — from those in large multi-national organizations to those in small, nimble companies — have gotten the word that diversity and inclusion are important.

The research is overwhelming, and virtually impossible to miss. Diverse teams, and inclusive habits, are as close as you can get to a one-two punch of team performance and corporate responsibility. With that, however, comes the possibility of focusing so heavily on one factor — inclusion — that leaders neglect another important element: balance.

Balance, as it relates to inclusion, is leading in a way that supports the needs of the individual, while still focusing on the needs of the business. At NLI, we call this balance “optimal inclusion,” because it allows leaders and co-workers to focus on getting the right perspectives quickly and deliberately, for both the employee’s and the organization’s benefit.

## **Inclusion, defined**

There are two types of inclusion: cognitive inclusion and social inclusion.

Cognitive inclusion is the act of valuing someone’s input, ideas, perspective, point of view, or contribution. It’s wanting to hear what someone has to say, and believing that it will add to the quality of the decision. Social inclusion is the act of physical representation or informing. It’s about making sure someone was on the right email, in the right meeting, or otherwise aware of the decision that is being made, or the action that is being taken.

When either of these domains of inclusion are unsatisfied — what we can call “under-inclusion — an employee may feel that their ideas are not welcome, or that they themselves are not welcome. We have all experienced how threatening that can feel, and research even points to how it can have such deleterious effects as negatively affecting IQ, pro-social behavior, and even overall health.

The opposite, however, is over-inclusion. This manifests itself in too many people on emails or in meetings, individuals with too many projects and responsibilities, and an overall feeling of being taxed or overwhelmed. Much has been written about the degree to which some workers have begun to equate *busy* with *important*. That desire to be involved in a lot of things, even as the pace of the business continues to increase, can be self-defeating, as people may take on more, but successfully execute on less.

Neither of these conditions is advantageous for getting the most out of a team, which is why the solution, as simple as it may seem, is reaching optimal inclusion.



*There are two types of inclusion: cognitive inclusion and social inclusion.*

### **Why optimal inclusion matters**

Optimal inclusion is about making sure people feel included in the right ways, at the right time, without compromising inclusion or speed to execution. When leaders fail to optimally include, they risk creating social threats in others, primarily to their senses of fairness and relatedness.

Consider the classic example of exclusion called Cyberball. A participant, Player 1, is focused on a screen, and hooked up to an fMRI, so that we can see what is happening in her or his brain. They are told they are playing with two other participants, and the goal is to toss the digital ball using a keyboard.

At first, everyone passes the ball to one another, and everything seems fine. But soon after, the other two participants start passing the ball only to one another, excluding Player 1. What Player 1 doesn't know is that there aren't two other players; they are actually no more than a computer program designed to stop tossing Player 1 the ball. What Player 1 does know is that they feel excluded, frustrated, and upset.

Likewise, we saw firsthand how much over-inclusion affects people's daily work life in the responses to our recent article in Harvard Business Review entitled, "How to Gracefully Exclude Coworkers from Meetings, Emails, and Projects."

Little did we know just how much it would resonate with leaders and employees all over. We certainly didn't expect the volume of email we got from people who said that they had just forwarded a copy of that article

to their team, or that they could breathe sighs of relief now that they knew they weren't the only one dealing with over-inclusion.

Clearly, optimal inclusion was a topic leaders thought a lot about, even if they didn't necessarily have the language for it. Now that leaders and employees have the language, let's have those productive, transparent conversations about what it means to be optimally included — and start creating more efficient, effective teams as soon as possible.

# If You Want Employees to Speak Up, Start by Minimizing Threat



*The secret to  
lifting voices*

By Chris Weller



Employees don't keep quiet or speak up just because it's their personality. Often, the work environment plays an outsized role in whether people find their voice.

Specifically, it may all come down to *social threat*, or the performance-limiting experience of feeling powerless, excluded, or uncertain in social contexts.

Based on NLI's review of the research on quality conversations, people will speak up in difficult situations only if their perceived threat is low. That means they feel psychologically safe and know that speaking up won't result in punishment or retribution. If employees think there's more to lose than gain, they'll probably keep quiet.

## Situations over personalities

One of the more intriguing pieces of research in this area comes from organizational psychology experts Hemant Kakkar, of the London Business School, and Subra Tangirala, from the University of Maryland. In a 2016 study, which the authors recently explored in a piece for HBR, they found *situational* factors — not so much *personal* factors — led employees to speak up.

Situational factors generally boil down to company culture: *Do people feel dissent is welcome? Will their manager listen to them?* They include the many environmental cues that people use to guide their behavior. (It also happens to be why NLI defines "culture" as shared everyday habits.)

Situational factors, the researchers found, more often led people to highlight physical safety concerns, challenge the status quo, and report questionable behavior.

"This finding suggests that if you want employees to speak up, the work environment and the team's social norms matter," the authors wrote. "Even people who are most inclined to raise ideas and suggestions may not do so if they fear being put down or penalized. On the flip side, encouraging and rewarding speaking up can help more people do so, even if their personality makes them more risk-averse."

That's a key takeaway for leaders: The more you validate the act of speaking up, the more people will speak up.



*That's a key takeaway for leaders: The more you validate the act of speaking up, the more people will speak up.*

### **Reduce threat, raise voice**

In situations where employees speak up, the common thread is that using their voice feels non-threatening. When people feel threatened, their cognitive functions suffer. They back away from the problem. Meanwhile, those who feel rewarded — or expect a future reward — tend to feel motivated to act, and in this case speak up. It all depends on whether the organization has made it clear, through its shared everyday habits, that people have more to gain than lose when they use their voice.

We know from research on inclusion that there's a huge upside to raising voices. Greater diversity of thought can lead to less-biased decision-making and greater collective intelligence, and it can cancel out the downsides of power imbalances.

In other words, teams that permit speaking up won't just be safer psychologically — they'll be stronger and more effective as a whole.



# How to Create Cultures of Cooperation



## An NLI Summit Q&A with Neuroscientist Jay Van Bavel

By Jay Dixit



Jay Van Bavel is a social neuroscientist who studies unconscious bias, group identity, and cooperation, specializing in understanding the neural mechanisms by which a sense of belonging to a group influence our thoughts and behavior.

His most recent study found that increasing a group's sense of common identity leads to greater cooperation, coordination, and collective intelligence — all topics he discussed at the 2018 NeuroLeadership Summit. We reached him at his lab at New York University, where he is Associate Professor of Psychology and Neural Science and an affiliate at the Stern School of Business. He is also editor-in-chief of the NeuroLeadership Journal and serves as one of our senior scientists.



**What are you working on that's most exciting to you right now?**

**Jay Van Bavel:** I'm working on how to understand group coordination and cooperation. We've found that when you build a sense of common identity in a group, that leads to greater cooperation, and people are willing to sacrifice more to make the group succeed. They're also more collectively intelligent.



**Can you define collective intelligence?**

**JVB:** Groups that perform better than the sum of their parts are considered collectively intelligent. Great groups outperform groups that might have a smarter person or a higher average intelligence. They're really good at problem-solving tasks and creativity tasks.

What's going is that they're communicating very well, making sure everybody's insights are considered. This allows them to brainstorm and come up with different ways to solve the problem.



**Can you tell me how group identity fits into your recent study?**

**JVB:** We measured group identity and found that groups with the most pride and common connection to their team perform best at cooperation games.

In one condition, we tell people they're all competing against each other and the best individual is going to win. When we do that, they don't work well together. Their performance isn't very good.

But when we tell people they're working as a team to compete with other teams, it's in that condition that they work best with the group they're with and cooperate the most. Those teams end up having the best problem-solving.



***You've designed these tasks where cooperating increases the team's performance as a whole. Is that the kind of task that best reflects what people typically have to do in organizations in the real world? Are business tasks generally tasks where a group cooperating is does better than individuals working independently and solo?***

**JVB:** Yes. In science, the best papers are driven by teams of great people working together. Even though we have this notion of Einstein, that's not how science works. The most impactful science is done by teams, not by a single genius.

In Hollywood, Pixar is famous for having these incredible creative teams that go off and do their bits and then come back and share knowledge and give each other critical feedback.

Some tasks, like sales, are individualistic — you have people out in the field knocking on doors or making calls one-on-one.



***Yes! And salespeople need support, too.***

**JVB:** Most work nowadays — especially really complex high-impact work or creative work — is done in groups or teams.



***What can organizations do to increase cooperation in their teams?***

**JVB:** There's a couple of things. One, they need to build a common sense of identity on teams that are working together. What we've found is that (A) you can measure it, so you can see which teams already have that kind of identity. And (B), you can manipulate it — managers and leaders can be empowered to create that sense of identity.

Research has found that diverse teams benefit the most from having a group identity, because it helps them get on the same page and put aside their differences. Then they can use their different insights to solve a problem together, without the conflict that normally would come from that — and without breaking into a bunch of individuals.



***How can organizations create a culture of cooperation?***

**JVB:** Cooperation is hard. It takes a lot of prefrontal cortex activity to overcome your impulse to be selfish and instead engage in cooperation. We found that people who have damaged their prefrontal cortex can't do it. That same logic probably also applies if you're distracted — it might make cooperation hard.

But if you're working with a group of cooperative people — if you're in a cooperative team or an organization with a cooperative culture — all of a sudden cooperation becomes easy. It no longer requires your lateral prefrontal cortex, your working memory, or executive function — and it seems to feel good.



*...we've found that  
in places where  
cooperation is  
common, people  
do it automatically.*

Once you turn the corner and create a culture of cooperation, people get a reward signal when they make decisions to cooperate, so it becomes easier. It doesn't require as much self-control and regulation, and they can do it without thinking.

We've looked at data from around the world from thousands of people, and we've found that in places where cooperation is common, people do it automatically. Whereas if they're coming from places where cooperation is not common, like Manhattan, then it's hard for them, and it takes them longer to come to the decision to cooperate.



**What are people responding to exactly? Is it the norms of the group they're in?**

**JVB:** Yup, exactly. Norms. Of course, some people pick up on norms and other people don't. This really only applies to people who are paying attention to the norms around them. When the norms are good, they cooperate.



**So how can an organization create a norm of cooperation?**

**JVB:** Several things. First, they can hire cooperators. Hire people who are cooperative and don't hire people with sharp elbows.

Second, promote and reward people — especially in public ways — who show that they value cooperation and collaboration.

Third, leadership can send signals by being role models. If you put people in a group with somebody who's a "supercooperator," who's

super helpful, then for people who are on the fence about what to do, it triggers their cooperative instinct and they jump in and get cooperative.

The other thing we found — and this is remarkable — is then if you take that person who was on the fence and put them in a new group, now they become the supercooperator in the new group! And it then triggers other people to jump in and be cooperative, so you have this ripple effect — a cascade of cooperation and collaboration.



***You mentioned an individual difference where some people pick up on group norms and some don't. How do you reach people who don't pick up on the norms?***

**JVB:** Those people are harder to reach. Most people pick up on the norms of the group. But for some people, you have to make it explicit. That's going to come out the language you use, the reward structure you create, and the signals leaders give.



***You mentioned the idea of an individual who's a "supercooperator." Can you tell me about those kinds of people and what their traits are?***

**JVB:** About 5 to 10% of people are what we can call here "supercooperators." If they're playing a cooperation game with other people, they will give every time, even if they're being taken for a sucker and other people are exploiting them.

Economists predicted that these people would not exist. But here's why they exist. It's because other people — people who might be on the fence — they see that and it triggers them to cooperate. Then they start working with that person, and other people see that person and start to value them more, and they get invited to other events where they get the chance to cooperate. That's the strategy of supercooperators.

Rational economists think these people shouldn't exist because they're just going to get exploited. Well, they actually get all kinds of rewards in the long run. They get invited to more opportunities to collaborate, they trigger other people around them to collaborate and cooperate, and it ripples out — and that's where you can have cooperation that goes viral.

But you need somebody to trigger that. It turns out 1 in 10 or 1 in 20 people are that person.



***But ordinary people can also be turned into supercooperators?***

**JVB:** Yes. Most people are what's called "conditional cooperators." They'll cooperate when it's rewarded, but they're selfish if they see everybody else be selfish and selfishness is rewarded.

But you can nudge people to be supercooperators if they're around other supercooperators. That's when you get these cultures like Pixar that thrive because they create a culture where everybody's helping everybody. Everybody's sharing information and giving creative insights and everybody wants everybody else to succeed.

Once you create that culture, 60% of people who are on the fence start to get nudged every day in little ways into that supercooperator mode they have within them.



***Would you call cooperation and collaboration a “mindset”? Is it analogous to Growth Mindset — like Cooperative Mindset?***

**JVB:** I would call it “cooperative cultures,” but you could call it Cooperative Mindset. You can put people into a Cooperative Mindset or a Selfish Mindset.



***Are there cues that trigger Selfish Mindset? And should organizations be trying to eliminate those cues?***

**JVB:** Totally! My dad used to be in used car sales. In the manager’s office, they posted charts that showed all the car salesmen and their sales for the week. You could see who was selling the most cars, and at the end of the month, the person who sold the most got a bonus.

And what would happen is no one helped each other close a sale! Say you were about to close a sale with one customer, then a customer you’d been working the previous week walked in ready to buy a car. What you *should* do is say to your colleague, “Hey, you close this deal and I’ll split the commission with you.”

But no one ever did that! They’d just send the person home and say, “Come see me another time.” And if the person didn’t come back, the dealership lost a sale.

It creates a sharp elbows and very selfish mindset that’s not in the dealership’s best interest. Their goal should be to sell as many cars as possible — not to have the best salesmen possible.



***The sales bonus system incentivized competitive behavior and performance, but it’s incompatible with Cooperative Mindset.***

**JVB:** Yeah! That incentive system — that’s the old way of thinking about this. What we should be doing instead is look at an organization’s higher goals and ask: Are they nudging people and rewarding people and sending the right signals to get people to do the things we actually care about?



***Any other advice for organizations about creating super successful teams?***

**JVB:** I would just say the big thing is: Think about identity — how to create a powerful, compelling group identity. That’s the key to unlocking our potential.

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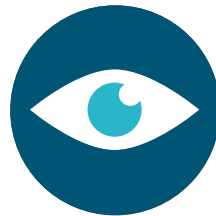
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