

OVERCOMING UNCONSCIOUS BIAS



How to Build a More Inclusive Team & Enhance the Guest Experience

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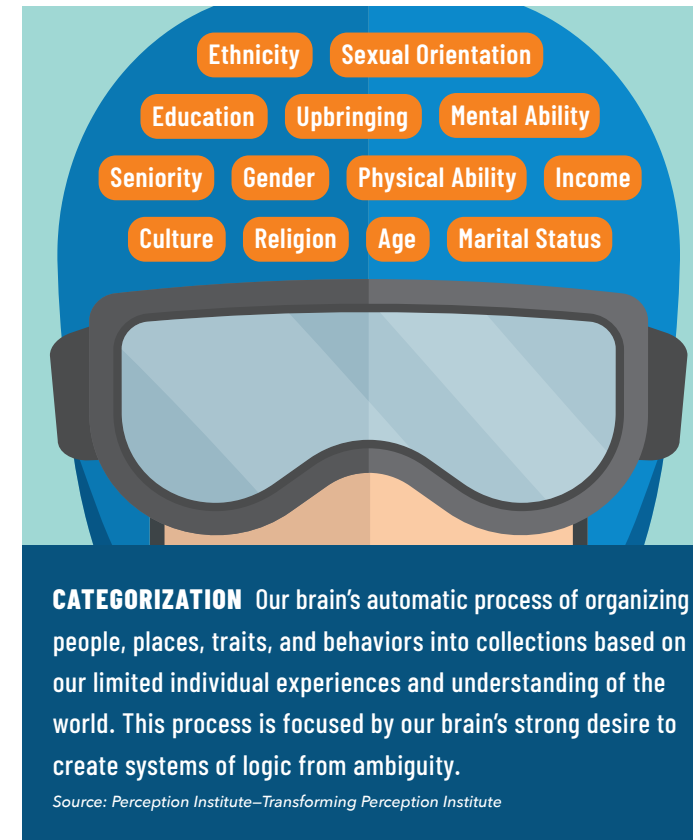
In early October, just in time to enjoy peak fall foliage at Killington Resort in Vermont, operators from several resorts flocked to Snow Operating's annual Immersion Conference to explore barriers to entry to our sports and strategies for beginner conversion.

Snow Operating's President and CEO Joe Hession and other industry leaders identified trends such as the influence of mega passes on pricing and time poverty experienced by busy individuals and overscheduled families as they shared tactics to reduce the hassle factor for all skiers and riders. Jeff Biloba, vice president of Global Resorts at Burton Snowboards, said "perception" is the number one barrier to entry. That is, how will potential guests perceive the value of the experience compared to the effort and cost?

Of course, the perception question is foundational to strategic decision-making. But there is a hidden variable to

the guest's perception that can undermine efforts resorts are making to solve these ongoing challenges. It is something most operators are not aware of. What is this variable? It's the unconscious bias, which all humans have, that guides our judgments and actions.

Even those with the best intentions behave in biased ways without ever realizing it. This institutionalized behavior has disparate impacts on people from different backgrounds. Unconscious bias also affects how we recruit, hire, train, and consider team members for promotion. It affects activities from the marketing of our resorts to ensuring that team members are willing and able to deliver on your brand promises. Think about that. Is it possible that resort leaders and team members unconsciously demonstrate a preference for certain guest and employee demographics—welcoming some and subtly or even overtly discouraging others?



The Unconscious Brain

New research in the fields of neuroscience and social psychology has shed light on *unintended people preferences*. These are preferences formed by our personal experiences, by how we were socialized as children and young adults, and how we have been affected by media representations of different groups. Our experiences act as social filters in which we make assessments and judgments of the people around us. When we are under pressure, are short on time, or don't pay attention, unconscious biases are triggered more easily.¹

On any given day, guest-facing team members may perceive individuals as more or less physically or even intellectually able to participate successfully, or they may make assumptions about guests' level of affluence, viewing them as lesser-value customers. As an example, consider the way snow-play enthusiasts who don't purchase lift tickets are often regarded: as people who probably don't have the physical expertise, who may not be able to afford a lift ticket, or even have the "sophistication" to ski or snowboard.

In other words, team members may judge the book by its cover without even realizing it. Humans have a natural tendency to place each other in social categories based on visual cues including gender, cultural background, body size and height, as well as political affiliation, job roles, and religious identity, to name a handful. And, to be fair, our brain does this because it must. The subconscious brain processes

11 million bits of information in a second. In that same time, the conscious brain processes only 40 bits. If we had to process everything consciously, the day would be so exhausting we'd never get through it! To help us function, our brain takes shortcuts.

These shortcuts—when applied to characteristics, traits, and behaviors of a certain group of people—are called stereotypes, and they apply not only to the assumptions we make about guests but also to the assumptions we make about our own employees. For example, if women are broadly categorized as teachers and nurses, or only as ticket sellers or food workers in base areas, rather than performing on-mountain roles, and men are viewed as organizational leaders, carpenters, or on-mountain snowmakers and mechanics, these associations become hard-wired within the human brain. When we hold negative or outdated stereotypes, unconscious bias can arise.

Herein lies the problem. Our biases tend to manifest in how we actually feel about people and in how we treat them, whether preferentially or non-preferentially. Affinity bias—a marked preference for those we relate to the most—is institutionalized in American organizations, including the ski business. This bias has unintentionally created a good-old-boys' network, making upward mobility more accessible for white men. We tend to recruit, hire, and promote individuals who look like us, sound like us, and have last names like us.

When we have an affinity for someone with similar characteristics and traits, we tend to support their ideas, and we may even regularly go for coffee or lunch together, or for beers after work—all positive behaviors that can strengthen rapport and our bond to the tribe.

If we *do not* have that affinity, we may find ourselves questioning the person's suitability for a certain role, and doubt their competence or performance. This can lead to showing a general disregard for that person, where we rudely take a call or text when they're trying to talk to us, or cut them off or ignore their comments in a meeting. These may seem like small issues, but they can fracture the morale of a team, create work "silos," and lead to undeserved and unfair treatment, even termination, of a person.

Managers need to make a conscientious effort to be aware of and suppress any bias they may feel, *especially* toward someone who is different from them. And, if they witness such bias in others, they should take steps to eliminate it, which may include a group training session to raise awareness of unconscious bias and the impact it can have on people.

Are We Consciously 'Woke'?

Most of us may think we treat people fairly, but we aren't always fully aware of our own biases (or willing to admit that we have them). When we are truly honest with ourselves ►

about how we assess someone else, we may realize that we aren't being as impartial as we would like to think. In the African American culture, there is a term for this internal awareness of issues concerning social and racial justice: "woke."² This term, and the encouragement to "stay woke," describes an informed, questioning, self-educating individual.

The following statistics are worthy of reflection. A January 2018 report from the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program reveals that the Millennial generation is now 44 percent non-white; nearly a quarter of the total US population; and two-fifths of the working age population. The report underscores the impact Millennials will have as America prepares for its first non-white majority generation, which will succeed them.³

So, when will our industry be truly "woke?" Only 15 percent of skiers and riders are non-white, while up to 30 percent of never-ers are of diverse ethnic backgrounds, according to Dave Belin, director of consulting services at RRC Associates since 2001 and primary author of the *NSAA Economic Analysis of US Ski Areas* survey. However, your resort may not have fully explored opportunities to attract diverse skiers and riders. Clearly socio-economic status and resort accessibility will continue to influence how consumers spend leisure time.

"If growth is going to happen, resorts need to broaden their customer bases," Belin said. "The lift ticket is still king. Widening the portal to non-white participants has got to be part of a resort's growth and conversion strategy."

A word of caution against being too self-confident about your resort's current success attracting both non-white guests and team members. Even if you are beginning to see an uptick in participation, don't assume it's because of your deliberate efforts to spread the word and lay out the welcome mat. That increase may be primarily relative to your proximity to a major metropolitan area like the Bay Area or Los Angeles in California, or along the 91 and 89 interstate corridors in New Hampshire and Vermont, respectively.

One way to help make the sport feel more accessible to non-whites is to make marketing images appeal to them, starting with your website. Audit your web page for inclusive images, and assess how marketing and sales might more directly target certain populations. And, you might disrupt conventional thinking by reigniting the potential of tubing and snow-play areas as stepping stones to the purchase of lift tickets. This is an opportunity to indulge in *conscious* affinity bias, and view these demographics as potential skiers and riders.

I recently Googled the terms "skiers" and "riders" without specifying national origin or color and was not surprised that the images that emerged were homogenous. Although

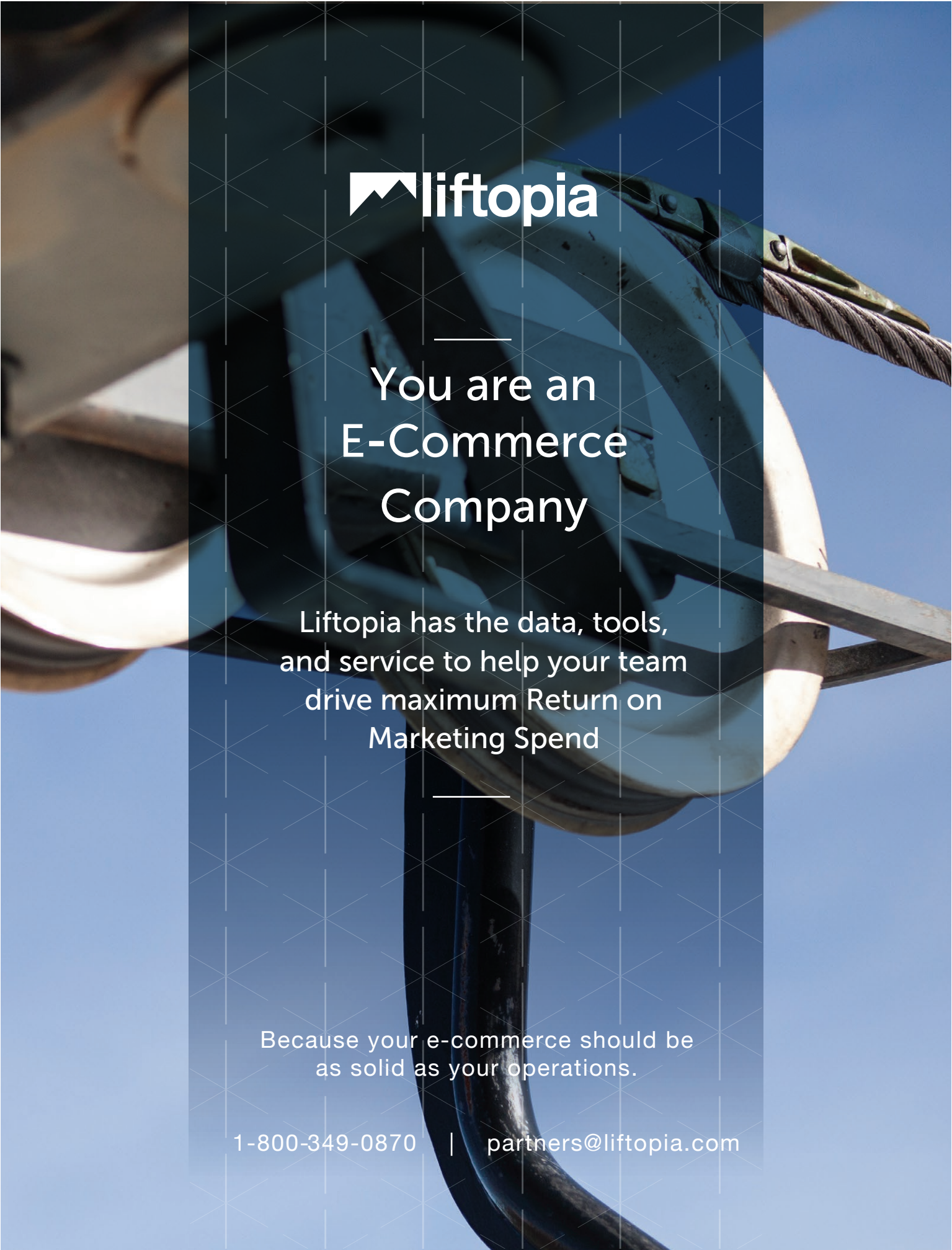



INCLUSION The considerate process of creating an environment that welcomes, values, and supports all individuals in an effort to respect their unique qualities.

we are conscious of the importance of showcasing families and are much less likely to limit action shots to male skiers and riders, we all-too-often exclude images of non-white snow enthusiasts on resort webpages and in industry marketing materials.

Why don't we notice this? It is not a deliberate effort to exclude people; it's unconscious. It's likely no one at the decision-making table reflects the diversity that could be represented in media images. Make an effort to select imagery that is more diverse. You might even ask a person of color to critique your website and other marketing collateral. I'd be willing to bet they'll have some useful, enlightening feedback.

One of the most recent examples of bias in our culture is the well-known Starbucks incident in which a manager in Philadelphia called the police on two black men who had been waiting for a friend at the store. The men were released without being charged. Starbucks apologized and announced it would close more than 8,000 of its stores in the United States for one day to provide "racial bias" training for its 175,000 employees. ▶





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We must acknowledge that our industry and the people who work in and visit our resorts are a microcosm of the current American climate. This means that some team members may overtly discuss their biases that can negatively impact employee morale as well as the guest experience.

Of course, Starbucks is not the only company in the spotlight lately due to a racially tinged public relations debacle, nor was this the last such incident. As I write this my newsfeed reports a woman in St. Louis was fired from her job after a video went viral of her following an African-American man around the apartment building they both live in and calling the police. Other recent incidents include the firing of a manager at a Birmingham, Ala., Subway store after a video went viral of her spewing racial slurs at a fellow employee’s family. Papa John’s founder John Schnatter stepped down as board chairman after using a racial slur, and ABC fired Roseann Barr after her racist tweets about former presidential adviser Valerie Jarrett.

Any commentary on bias would be incomplete without acknowledging that some individuals feel emboldened to publicly vent their hatred, racism, misogyny, Islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia, anti-Semitism, and anti-immigrant sentiments. We must acknowledge that our industry and the people who work in and visit our resorts are a microcosm of the current American climate. This means that some team members may overtly discuss their biases, which can negatively impact employee morale as well as the guest experience. And if managers say anything off-color about any protected class, it condones that behavior for team members and may place your organization in legal jeopardy, or at the very least provoke an unwanted public relations issue if caught on cellphone video.

Powerful Provocative Training

Addressing unconscious bias requires a willingness to acknowledge the truth, which can be encouraged through effective training. In workshops I conducted recently on these challenges in our industry, I showed Stanley Nelson’s 7-minute documentary (created for Starbucks), which effectively conveys the alternate reality that many black Americans inhabit.

In the video a young man in his 20s explained, “I have to make sure I give enough space between myself and other commuters on the train to make sure I’m not making someone uncomfortable. I need to make sure my hands are visible, so

they don’t think I’m stealing, I make eye contact with security and managers, so they don’t think I’m hiding anything, and I watch my tone to make sure I don’t come off as threatening. Just trying to leave the house some days is hard. These things keep me at home, away from everything.” A young woman added, “It’s not like I can mute my actual, physical blackness, right? So, it’s an arsenal of different masks. And it happens every time I leave my house.”⁴ Interspersed with these interviews is footage of citizens being heckled, dragged out of planes, and surveilled in stores.

In stark contrast, a white man confides, “I haven’t really thought about my racial identity much. When I leave my house regardless of where I’m going, I’m just walking out my door, I’m not walking out thinking what kind of hurdle I’m going to run into today or how I’ll be judged. I walk out a free man. I just do my thing.”

Most ski area employees probably assume that everyone feels as carefree as the white man, but they don’t. Guest-facing employees and marketing teams should be reminded to think about what it would be like to visit the ski area or look at the website from the perspective of someone else, such as the 20-year-old African American fellow in the Starbucks training film.

STEREOTYPES, SOCIAL FILTERS AND HIDDEN BIASES

Factors that may influence our assessment of others include:

- Appearance, height, weight
- Physical attributes
- Education level
- Tattoos, body art/jewelry
- Various religions/Atheists
- Gun owners
- Accents/English as a second language
- Welfare recipients
- Sexual orientation, gender identity and expression
- Age
- Cultural background
- Cultural clothing, e.g., hijab, yarmulke
- Disabilities

I was both encouraged and disturbed by stories shared and the unpredictable reactions of supervisors and managers in my workshops. After showing the film, many participants expressed disgust, anger and sadness about the plight of their fellow humans, others were suspicious that the media has exaggerated racial issues and that these issues aren’t happening with the frequency depicted in the film, or that ►



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people of color are not giving white Americans a chance. In the face of all evidence to the contrary regarding hate in America, some people were clearly conflicted.

“Motivated reasoning” is how people convince themselves or remain convinced of what they want to believe—they seek out agreeable information and learn it more easily; and they avoid, ignore, devalue, forget, or argue against information that contradicts their beliefs.⁵

I gently fanned the flames so opposing views could be expressed and acknowledged, exposing a variety of stereotypes, social filters, and hidden biases in our workplaces. One senior manager shared that he had happily married a woman he met through the International Staffing Program. He was confronted by his own direct report, also a manager, who expressed strong opinions about giving work to “foreigners” and his contentious views on immigration. Another senior manager shared that as the parent of a transgender child he’d had to address ignorance about sexuality both inside and outside of work. Frustrations were expressed about having to adapt to unfamiliar religious traditions, practiced by guests of certain sects, both on mountain and in food venues. On a positive note, male managers listened attentively to women who shared frustrations with sexism and their struggles to break through the pink ceiling. Not one male manager attempted to take the position that males have become victims of women who reveal stories of assault.

When white participants were asked if they felt their skin color or accents impacted their coworker’s perception of their intelligence or competence or if they had ever altered their communication style (dialed it up or down) to avoid playing into stereotypes, most could not relate. The big “a-ha” moment came with the realization that they are *not* impacted by prejudice every single day and never have to think about it.

One participant, a snowsports school manager, shared a story about how his own gender and age bias had been a factor during interviews he was conducting for children’s instructors. Initially, he had automatically pictured a teenage female for these roles, but decided to set aside his unconscious bias and take a chance on an enthusiastic teenaged male and a 70-year-old experienced male instructor. As it turned out, kids and parents adored them both, and they became superstars at the school.

Another watershed moment arrived when the singular non-white manager in the room shared obstacles he had faced on his ascent to management. Originally from South America, he was shocked by his first encounter ever with racism (which occurred not in his home country but in the US). He validated many similar experiences relayed by people interviewed in the Starbucks training film. He confided that ►

TOP TEN

WAYS TO MITIGATE BIASES

How can we mitigate unconscious bias and become more inclusive for both guests and team members? Here are some suggestions for ways to address this issue:

1. Encourage senior leaders to take a stand and model inclusive behaviors.
2. Analyze which unconscious biases are most likely to affect your organization, and develop anti-bias training on these specific resort issues.
3. Make it a part of your area’s culture to openly discuss unconscious bias, and clarify your commitment to eliminating it wherever possible (as the saying goes, “Sunlight is the best disinfectant”).
4. Link the expectation of inclusion to your mission statement and EEO policy, and discuss expectations and your zero-tolerance policy for discrimination or rudeness of any kind in your new and rehire orientations.
5. Conduct outreach recruitment for team members and outreach marketing for guests.
6. Eliminate hiring and advancement practices that perpetuate institutional bias such as settling on a pool of applicants of only one gender and conducting those interviews with only one gender present.
7. Audit pathways to upward mobility. If a manager gives 10 performance reviews—five to men and five to women—and the five top-rated performers are women, that’s a clear indication that there might be a pro-female bias in play. It might be total coincidence, but it’s still a clear call for an evaluation of the process. If the data reveals bias, someone should intervene.⁶
8. Post all job openings and spread the net wide, encouraging all genders to apply.
9. Set diversity goals. Be creative. Look in the most obvious places, in local organizations, and to your current staff. Invest in those with diverse backgrounds and give them a seat at the table.
10. Consider the “blind interview” process when screening candidates, not looking at anyone’s name or gender and instead considering on merit alone.

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he'd felt invisible at times trying to find a sense of belonging as he realized that there was no senior role model in the organization with a similar racial identity to his own.

What kinds of issues and related biases would you hear at your resort if you were to conduct a similar session?

Aspire to Inspire

The late, great chef and TV personality Anthony Bourdain was one of the most prominent voices connecting the worlds of food and politics. In his travel shows—*Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations* (2005–12), *The Layover* (2011–13), and *Parts Unknown* (2014–18)—he tried to teach Americans not to be scared of other people. He was never afraid to challenge his own ignorance. He wanted to make the world a more inclusive place. He advocated travel as a road map to deeper empathy and understanding. Bourdain sat down at the table with families from different cultures across the world and showed that all humans are pretty much the same. We all want and need love, a sense of belonging, and we hope for a better world in which our children can thrive.

Our guests and team members want the same thing. Your inspirational message as a leader should assert that your resort will not make distinctions regarding any person's relative value as a human being, no matter their origin.

A worthy goal for our industry would be to breathe life into these efforts to welcome *all* guests and team members, regardless of their differences. ■

Laura Moriarty is a nationally known speaker, corporate trainer, and frequent contributor to the Journal. She will lead workshops on the importance of overcoming unconscious bias at the NSAA Winter Conference in Killington, Vt., February 5–6, 2019, and at NSAA's National Convention in San Diego, April 29–May 2, 2019.

Sources

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