



Could Unconscious Bias Impact Board Searches?

By Caroline Schoenecker and Natalie Cooper

Boards that are intentional about promoting diversity in the boardroom may need to consider whether unconscious bias in board search processes is inhibiting progress.

Unconscious bias is the brain's tendency to make snap judgments, delete or prioritize information, categorize, and make assessments before a person is consciously aware of doing so. These split-second decisions and judgments can become problematic when they create advantages for some or disadvantages for others. It may be difficult to envision how a board could achieve diversity in the boardroom if decisions on selecting new members may be influenced by unconscious bias.

Several types of bias have the potential to affect board search processes in ways that may impede a

board's ability to recruit diverse candidates. Some types of bias to be aware of include the following:

- **In-group/out-group.** People naturally show affinity for groups to which they belong. If recruiting is confined to people from Ivy League universities, for example, or people who have served previously as CEOs, that may present a bias in the search process.

- **Affinity.** People tend to associate with individuals whom they perceive to be similar to themselves. If a candidate is regarded as a potential misfit with the boardroom culture, the dissonance could be more associated with a perception that the candidate is not enough like current board members, perhaps due to differences in gender, race, or ethnicity.

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■ **Confirmation.** People tend to give more consideration to information that confirms rather than challenges what they know. In a board search process, this could lead to candidates being dismissed if they present a point of view that contradicts prevailing thought.

■ **Perception.** Stereotypes and assumptions about certain groups of people in relation to, for example, hairstyles, accents, or manner of dress can act as obstacles to individuals in those groups. Perception bias can lead to conclusions that a candidate is not a good fit for a board based on such attributes.

In contemplating the board's director candidate profile, consider how criteria for desired skills, competencies, and experience are defined. Boards may indicate that they require "leadership experience in finance," which may be more relevant and less prone to bias than seeking "former chief financial officers." A matrix may become a helpful tool for defining and evaluating the various factors and criteria.

To help mitigate unconscious bias as part of a comprehensive strategy for learning related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, training for the board and the broader organization may help cultivate cognizance of how bias may show up in the boardroom and board processes, such as during due diligence interviews

where board members and C-suite leaders vet director candidates.

Training may also help embed this awareness into each step of the decision-making process for identifying new directors. Another step may be to establish accountability practices, such as creating a board culture that drives expectations to recognize and challenge when bias might be present.

When boards proactively commit to a process for bringing in new members while mitigating the potential for bias in the recruitment process, they may be more likely to build boards that are equipped with the broad range of skills and characteristics that are critical for leading companies in today's environment.

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