Understanding the sources of organisational prejudice

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Prejudice has serious implications for both organisations and individuals in terms of effectiveness and contentment. Binna Kandola examines research on the main areas of concern.

The Macpherson Report defined institutional racism as "the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service" and "unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping". To begin to address the issues we need to understand the broader context, and so we really need to look at organisational prejudice.

Organisational Culture

This is probably the most potent source of prejudice since it supports many inherent behaviours and values. It includes those arising from the needs of the organisation and those influenced by the majority or 'in-group'. It is the 'in-group' who effectively define the culture in areas such as language, policies, norms, values and rules.

Either intentionally or unintentionally, this control is likely to lead to exclusionary justice based on the principle of it applying primarily to the 'in-group'.

The 'out-group', usually minorities or those with little power, are expected to fall in line with the moral codes and values set by the 'in-group', even if this includes the denigration of the 'out-group'. For various reasons 'out-groups' tend to collude with this, perpetuating what is considered acceptable or unacceptable behaviour at work.

Systems and Procedures

Inconsistent recruitment and selection methods play a key role in institutionalizing prejudice and I believe will be the next big battleground in fairness at work.

Research shows that informal networks are important in filling job vacancies at all levels and that they are segregated by sex and race. Not only does this affect the opportunity for individuals to compete for jobs, but employers' views of the characteristics of a 'good employee' tend to be ethnically-specific to Euro-Americans.

Structured processes contain similar biases. The use of competencies is considered best practice in selection yet there is increasing concern about their impact on diversity. By focusing exclusively on the behaviours found in many competency frameworks an organisation is being extremely prescriptive about the type of people they employ. They are ignoring those who may have a different approach to a problem but who are still effective workers.

The same criticism applies to appraisals. One study used attribution theory to explain differences in the way appraisees were treated. The findings suggested that poor performance by in-group members will be allowed to continue, whereas effective performance of out-group members will go unrecognised, leading to demotivation and possibly detriments in performance.

Solo or Token Status

The level of prejudice directed towards particular group members in an organisation will depend on the diversity of the workforce. Attention has been paid in literature to 'solo' or 'token' status. The former refers to the uniqueness of the individual in the workplace. The latter arises when this is coupled with the perception that favouritism has been shown to that individual.

The closer an individual is to being unique in a work setting the more likely it is that the majority group will:

- Focus on and exaggerate intergroup differences
- Hold to stereotypes
- Scrutinise them

Categorising someone as a 'token' has been found to lead to the assumption that they are incompetent. The effect on the individual of being 'solo' or 'token' status is that they are more likely to stereotype themselves and become more aware of their own behaviour. The anxiety and anger caused by this increased scrutiny can also impair actual performance.

To tackle issues of racism and sexism in organisations we need to acknowledge first that they exist. The research on organisational prejudice clearly shows what the main areas of concern are. By using this information we can continue the process of ensuring that the effects of prejudice and discrimination can be reduced.

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