How Search Committees Can See Bias in Themselves

Most hiring panels are designed to represent a diverse mix of people, yet they still bring with them hidden motives.

Lucy A. Leske | November 30, 2016

Questions about implicit bias are now part of most healthy, serious campus conversations — whether the topic is student admissions, campus policing, or faculty recruiting. These are critically important discussions to have, if only to cause every one of us to pause in our daily lives and consider the preconceptions and prejudices we may have.

One forum in which there is a need for continued exploration of bias is the leadership-search committee. In an effort to reduce bias and to ensure a diverse pool of candidates for leadership roles, institutions typically populate search committees with a mix of representatives — the idea being that diverse points of view and backgrounds will, among other things, bring implicit bias into the open and prevent it from coloring decisions.

The committees are inherently representative, but their members still bring with them hidden motives. With diversity of representation comes diversity of biases — about gender, race, age, body type, sexual orientation, dialect, accent, alma mater, hometown, degree worthiness, hairstyle, clothing. The list goes on.

What don’t we have biases about?

The challenge is identifying and recognizing when bias is affecting decisions, as well as figuring out whether to do anything to mitigate bias that works against the institution’s mission, values, and strategic priorities.

Broad representation can work in a committee’s favor as members question one another’s rigidities about types of candidates. However, having a diverse committee does not necessarily ensure that all voices are welcome or heard, nor does it ensure that bias will be eliminated. Group dynamics like seniority and interpersonal relationships can dampen honest and transparent conversations.

Entire groups can also bring blinders to the table. Conscious or unconscious, bias is always present and a challenge to ferret out.

In more than 20 years of work supporting administrative-search committees, I have observed both overt and hidden bias surface in many forms. Let me be the first to say that I recognize that my own judgment and analysis are influenced by biases developed long ago through my own upbringing and experiences. It takes hard work and constant examination of criteria, openness to others’ points of view, and a commitment to supporting each committee in its values to stay unbiased and offer good advice.

That I have seen bias creep into presidential or senior-level search committees should be no surprise, but it is always remarkable to hear it, nonetheless.

A common bias, for instance, relates to a candidate’s educational pedigree. So many search committees begin evaluating candidates there — making immediate and implicit assumptions about background, intelligence, and intellectual capacity. Their bias clouds their ability to evaluate what candidates have been able to accomplish with the tools and experiences they have had.

Many candidates were actively discriminated against when they were going through the educational system, yet committees hold it against them. Likewise, committees frequently treat candidates with military backgrounds as a bad fit with higher education and set them aside without a second look.

Biases are also not evenly applied across all sectors and positions. A committee member may be entirely comfortable with the notion of hiring someone from an underrepresented group for an entry-level or professorial post, but have
subconscious hesitations when the opening is for a senior administrator: Do I want this person representing my entire institution? What will people think?

For example, openly gay candidates may pass unremarkably through scrutiny for faculty roles by a committee focused on academic accomplishment and teaching skills but run into trouble for presidential positions where committees of mixed constituencies bring to the table biases about how presidents and their trailing family members ought to appear.

Likewise, women may get eager interest for midlevel staff positions in IT or finance but not be taken seriously as potential CIOs or CFOs. Interestingly, I frequently hear from women that they were advised early in their careers not to go after management positions but, instead, to take more interesting non-supervisory positions, a choice that reverberates later. I have seen committees eliminate fine candidates from consideration because of speculation that a résumé full of staff roles must mean the person is not a good manager.

Bias is equally insidious when hiring committees meet in person with candidates from underrepresented backgrounds. Implicit bias can award immediate credibility to candidates who fit the stereotypical mold — such as an applicant from a highly ranked university or a familiar organization. Their behavior may be less scrutinized than that of candidates from lower-ranked institutions or unfamiliar backgrounds.

Studies have shown that candidates who fit a stereotypical model are less closely analyzed because their performance meets stereotypical expectations for that role. By contrast, unconventional candidates may perform at a similar or higher level in the job interview but are examined more closely because they do not fall within expectations.

As search consultants, despite some of our best efforts, it is an uphill battle getting committees to put their actions behind their words and show that they are truly open to diverse backgrounds. Bias clogs the machinery all the time.

That said, there are ways we can minimize implicit bias. Sometimes it is as simple as asking committee members to take an Implicit Association Test from Project Implicit. As one of the project’s founders, Brian A. Nosek, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, has said, “Gaining insight into the mental operations that lead behavior astray of values is a precondition for predicting, understanding, and controlling implicit biases.”

Another approach gaining some ground in higher education is the use of assessment tools, particularly in high-level leadership searches. A search committee uses the tools to evaluate a candidate’s competencies, values, and motivators without any details of the person’s race, background, gender, or other such factors. The results are then compared with a larger database of executives who are high performers in the same sector.

Matching an applicant’s competencies against what the institution is trying to achieve doesn’t eliminate bias from decision-making, but it adds an unbiased method for evaluating a candidate’s fit and leadership potential. These assessments are a little like the opaque screens used in orchestra auditions — they strip away all physical attributes, educational background, and employment history, and bring to the surface the very things that organizations need to succeed.

For search committees that want to ensure that bias is either brought to the surface or reduced, here are five questions they should consider before embarking on presidential and other leadership recruitments:

- **What are our goals in regards to implicit bias?** Can we recognize our own biases to a greater degree, and thus minimize or eliminate them to reduce their effect upon viable candidates? Can we incorporate them into our discussions around candidates as they move forward through the process?

- **Which biases should we be on the lookout for?** In addition to race, gender, and other common categorizations, are there additional (perhaps more subtle) biases that could affect the search?

- **Which of those biases may be specific to leadership recruitment?** Search committees should be aware that biases may crop up in senior administrative searches in different ways or intensity than in faculty or staff searches. The committee must guard against stereotyping around socioeconomic class, academic degrees, nationality, and professional experience.

- **What methods and technologies are at our disposal?** How do we test ourselves? (Do we use the Implicit Association Test? Or undergo bias training through a consultant?) Other questions to consider: Is our institution experimenting with software and other technologies designed to eliminate references to gender, race, and other identifiers — even academic credentials? What about competency assessments? Are they effective in reducing biases, especially for senior-administrative positions?

- **What’s our plan?** How do we take our newfound knowledge about implicit biases and use it to actually minimize those biases as we begin a search?
Implicit bias may rear its head at any stage of the hiring process, and it is essential that search committees acknowledge that and ask the right questions from Day 1.

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