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GENERATE ALIGNMENT

Outsmarting Mindbugs: Working Towards Overcoming Hidden Biases

Podcast Template

Hello, my name is Courtney Moon with UF Training and Organizational Development, and I would like to discuss sneaky critters that lurk in our subconscious called “mindbugs.” These are hidden biases that can impact the organizations we lead.

To get started, listen carefully to the following riddle:

“A father and his son are in a car accident. The father dies at the scene and the son, badly injured, is rushed to the hospital. In the operating room, the surgeon looks at the boy and says, “I cannot operate on this boy. He is my son.”

Now, take a minute to consider “How is this possible?”

Did you think about it?

If your immediate reaction is puzzlement, that is because you made the automatic mental association between “male” and “surgeon.” The association of surgeon to male is part of a stereotype. In this riddle, that stereotype works as part of a mindbug.

Mindbugs are not conscious decisions we make as individuals. Instead, they are ingrained habits of thought that lead to error in how we perceive, remember, reason, and make decisions. There are also different types - such as visual, memory, availability and anchoring just to name a few.

Let’s take a look at the availability mindbug.

When a group of people were asked to choose between car accidents or abdominal cancer as a bigger cause of death in the United States, the majority selected car accidents. This has to do with car accidents being mentioned in the news, making them more accessible to our minds than other types of death. As a result this may lead to overestimating the number of car accident deaths and thinking there is a greater frequency of this occurrence because our mind has a greater availability to this type of event.

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So how does this affect us in the workplace? Exceptionally dangerous mindbugs are social mindbugs. These mindbugs can shape the decisions we make in our organization as it relates to who we hire, who we promote, how we evaluate our teams, and other crucial organizational decisions.

Social mindbugs cause routine mistakes by creating blindspots on how we interact with others. The book “Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People” defines a blindspot, or hidden bias as “bits of knowledge about social groups. These bits of knowledge are stored in our brains because we encounter them so frequently in our cultural environments. Once lodged in our minds, hidden biases can influence our behavior toward members of a particular group, but we remain oblivious to their influence.”

Research shows that despite our best intentions, hidden biases are part of our subconscious. Even worse, the same research has shown that mindbugs cannot be exterminated. However, they can be outsmarted through awareness, acknowledgement and a conscious effort to prevent their influence on our decisions.

So how do we outsmart our mindbugs?

First, we have to know that we have them.

It takes great courage to ask tough questions that can show aspects of our mental framework that go against our conscious personal beliefs and/or intentions. This may require using tools such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT) developed by Harvard University that helps identify automatic associations people have in their minds toward specific groups of people. Additionally, ask your colleagues for one-on-one feedback or take the 360 approach. You will also need to analyze your past decisions. Consider asking yourself:

- Do I typically hire the same type of person or personality type?
- When I say that a candidate is not the right fit, what do I mean?
- Who do I like to assign to work on project teams?
- Who do I encourage to lead or speak out at meetings?
- Am I creating opportunities for those less extroverted to demonstrate their capabilities to their colleagues and/or clients?
- How do I identify candidates for promotion and succession?

Once we’ve identified our mindbugs, we then need to acknowledge them.

Acknowledging requires exploring our blindspots in order to understand the disconnect between our actions and our intentions. The hard part of acknowledging we have hidden biases is that they might go against everything we consciously believe in. However, it also provides the opportunity to make very deliberate choices to counter the hidden bias and align our behavior to what we believe we should be doing.

This might mean we need to make an effort to seek out people who are different from us because of their background, experiences and capabilities. It might also mean learning to be part of a group or environment that is out of our comfort zone and taking specific actions to disrupt our routines when we are making decisions. By doing this, it prevents biases from shaping our behavior.

So, let’s review some actions that combat hidden biases. These take many forms, such as:

Building associations to counter stereotypes: When a specific stereotype is identified as part of our mindbug, find ways to strengthen those associations by countering the stereotype through daily observation and exposure. Remember the riddle at the beginning of this podcast? How about making a conscious choice to associate women with professions typically considered “male” professions.

Creating no-brainer solutions: Use a guideline that applies to everyone. Such as a standard typing test when hiring for a new administrative position.

Establishing a numerical way: Tying a number to specific actions or deliverables when providing feedback or when scoring a candidate.

Understanding in-group favoritism: This means taking a look at who we choose to help. At times, our helpfulness is determined by the connection we may have to an individual, maybe because they come from our same hometown or went to the same high school. Knowing that this might subconsciously influence your decision, when hiring, promoting, etc. can help in preventing that favoritism.

The important thing to remember about mindbugs is that small, reflective changes go a long way. Mindbugs may lurk in our subconscious, but we all have the power to weaken their influence by examining our actions.

Take the time to reflect and consider which of these critters are currently working against your good intentions and commit to creating a more inclusive work environment.

References

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