

DIVERSITY BRIEF: STEREOTYPE THREAT

Bias has often been focused on how individuals are unfairly judged. However, stereotype threat may be playing out in subtle & powerful ways.

By Poonam Raj Singh

–Steele & Aronson (1993)

Introduction

Stereotype threat is the fear that one's behavior will confirm an existing stereotype of a group with which one identifies with (Steele, Aronson 1993). The concept is rooted in social psychology, made popular by studies done by Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson. They observed that members of groups believed to be academically inferior within particular examples--for example, African American or Latino students enrolled in college or female students in math/science courses--scored much lower on tests when reminded during the pre-test instruction about their race or gender. The concept can be applied to various organizational contexts, including the legal sector. Key dimensions discussed here include:

- Intelligence as a social concept
- Explicit and implicit messages sent to individuals
- Universal application of stereotype threat

Intelligence as a Social Concept

The concept of stereotype threat significantly shifted the way social psychologists understood intelligence. Rather than seeing intelligence as something solely innate, they became to see intelligence as a concept that includes social transactions. In other words, preparation, skill level, and even talent doesn't seem to guarantee equal level of performance and these factors can

significantly be impacted by the social context of the individual. This message is contrary to what many leaders are made to believe, particularly in fields that require analytical strength. Subtle statements being made to the individual about their social identity and whether that is raising anxiety or fears in the individual will have a measurable impact on performance.

Explicit & Implicit Messages

It is important to note both explicit and implicit messages being sent to the individual. There may be unspoken messages being sent about who is important and what is important in an environment that is primarily white & male, for example. This may activate a stereotype to women that women are not good leaders. Having to constantly think about your positioning or what you are saying is exhausting for a minority leader, and they may question whether they have the energy to persist in the environment long-term.

Universal application

Minorities aren't the only ones who are vulnerable to stereotype threat. Every identity, across race, gender, class, and even factors such as being athletic or not can create a threat.

For example, a study conducted by Aronson in the 90s found that white male & engineering students (typically seen as the confident, dominant group in that context) did worse on tests when they were told the experiment was intended to investigate why Asians outperform other students.

Training & Coaching Strategies

It is certainly possible to reduce stereotype threat in organizations, and particularly necessary to do so in rigorous organizations where individuals may be constantly evaluated and assessed. Some strategies include:

- Bringing stereotypes to the surface & understanding the damaging effects of stereotype threat
- Listening to the sub-text of the messages being sent, and countering that message explicitly, in an effort to reduce anxiety & increase trust & safety
- Understanding how greater representation of minority leaders, role models, and mentors can reduce stereotype threat
- Provide coaching to individuals to help re-frame what they are experiencing & feeling, particularly if they are from a minority group.