



Self-Reflecting to Capitalise on Diversity

Instilling a grounded and positive sense of self in employees improves performance and ameliorates hidden bias.

Organisations often boast of the diversity of their workforce and strive to assemble teams with this in mind. There is an increasing body of evidence which suggests that teams with diverse gender, racial and ethnic makeup produce better results. This motivates the effort to recruit and develop talent from underrepresented groups, ensuring fair practices to address blatant bias and discrimination are in place.

Often overlooked, however, are issues that can arise from subtler biases borne of self-threat in intergroup situations. These challenges may include discomfort or self-doubt on the part of members of underrepresented and negatively stereotyped groups. They can also include members of majority groups underestimating the impact on minorities of what may seem like innocuous slights, due to a lack of knowledge and experience or due to concern about what it means to be a member of a privileged majority. These combined effects have the potential to create a stressful “closed” work environment. Although problematic for all workers, the cost is particularly high for individuals who most contribute to diversity – members of underrepresented groups (such as women and ethnic minorities). As corporations become more international and diverse, leaders need tools to facilitate recognition of potential injustices to ensure parity across the workforce.

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In our recent **research**, Jessica Sim and I identified how reflecting on their core personal values benefited women in competitive business settings by shielding them from the potentially deleterious effects of stereotype threat. This intervention helped women perform to their full potential by reducing self-doubt. A natural step was to extend this by focusing on the majority perspective – strengthening the core sense of self to help members of majority groups better recognise discrimination.

In our latest **working paper**, Marie-Claire Fennessy and I tested hypotheses that values-based self-affirmation, best-self reflection and mindfulness meditation would ameliorate threats to self-identity within a majority group (in this case, ethnic-majority Americans) and help them to better recognise prejudice and discrimination against racial, ethnic and religious minorities.

To test our hypotheses we examined the responses of 359 ethnic-majority American adults who were randomly assigned to complete one of four short activities: (1) values self-affirmation, (2) authentic best-self reflection, (3) mindfulness meditation, or (4) a control writing exercise. Participants in the values-based self-affirmation group wrote about values that were most important to them, reflected on why, and provided examples of their value

consistent behaviours. Participants in the authentic best-self group wrote about who they are at their best and described times when they were manifesting the best version of themselves. Those in the mindfulness meditation group followed an eight-minute recording taken from prior **research** guiding them through a focused breathing meditation exercise, and participants in the control group wrote about how values that were unimportant to them are meaningful to other people.

All participants then rated 10 policies, states of affairs and situations in which racial or ethnic minorities fare poorly on the degree to which they thought prejudice, discrimination or racism played a role. These items included interpersonal events such as a minority person being asked a culturally insensitive question or stopped at the airport for a “random” security search, as well as broader issues, such as stereotypical media representations of minorities and disproportionate poverty levels. Everyone also completed a eudaimonic well-being scale (from Aristotle’s concept of the true nature) designed to assess how authentic and centred on their true beliefs they felt.

On analysing the responses, we found several noteworthy effects. First, relative to the control (least important values) and mindfulness meditation conditions, individuals who had completed the values self-affirmation and authentic best-self writings exhibited substantially higher levels of eudaimonic well-being. Participants who completed the brief mindfulness meditation, however, had lower levels of eudaimonic well-being than those in the control condition. Eudaimonic well-being, in turn, was a strong positive predictor of recognising prejudice against minorities. Both the values-based self-affirmation and the authentic best-self writing improved recognition of prejudice as a function of eudaimonic well-being.

We were surprised by the finding that mindfulness meditation indirectly reduced prejudice recognition through reduced eudaimonic well-being – more research will be necessary to determine the nature of this. But a nice surprise was just how comparable the effects of the best-self reflection and values self-affirmation exercises were. Conceptually the similarity of findings with respect to best-self reflection and values self-affirmation makes sense, but, to our knowledge, no one had previously tested a comparison of these two interventions. We were also pleased to see the benefits of the effective interventions on eudaimonic well-being – that is, the deep, fulfilled sense of well being that comes with knowing and accepting oneself.

Lessons for business

As well as linking distinct academic literatures,

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these findings provide profound lessons for business. Identity resiliency through self-affirmation and best-self reflection facilitates getting diversity right from two angles. It enables members of majority groups to recognise injustice in their system and it also strengthens the ability of members of under-represented groups – even negatively stereotyped groups – to cope in an environment where the odds are against them. The intervention can shield minorities from the potentially destructive impacts of bias and stereotypes that can undermine their motivation and performance, enabling them to reach their potential.

Core values are tightly connected to people’s feelings of self-worth, and eudaimonic well-being is a core concept of positive functioning, both individually and as part of a team. Prejudice and stereotyping – even unconsciously – can undermine effectiveness directly through discrimination as well as indirectly through self-doubt resulting from the bias against one’s group. Thus, “affirming the self” benefits diversity; both minority and majority groups experience reduced self-threat and everyone becomes more open, grounded and able perform at their best, recognising injustice when it emerges. Our findings suggest that interventions for bolstering identity resilience improve intergroup relations and ameliorate social and professional inequalities.

Creating value

Our research focuses on benefits specifically with respect to diversity, but it also extends on previous organisational **research** that demonstrated the benefits of best-self reflection for an entire workforce in an Indian call centre. The study found that in contrast to enculturating new employees to develop pride in the organisation, initial socialisation focusing on personal identity (emphasising an individual’s authentic best self) creates more value for the company. Firms that encourage self-affirmation through values self-affirmation or best-self reflection facilitate a more open, confident and productive workforce.

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