

For Real Change in Diversity to Happen, GET UNCOMFORTABLE

BY FREDERICA A. PETERSON

We are at a pivotal time in our society when mortality, human rights, and the examination of our values are converging for our attention.

I have been part of many difficult conversations over the past few months with people searching for answers. Companies are looking for programs and initiatives that will “fix” the diversity and inclusion issue or that will provide HR or training departments with tools to “fix” it so that they can get back to business—and more important, not disrupt the status quo.

And herein lies the problem. We can’t just restructure some departments, change out a few key leadership positions, and revise some policies and expect real change to occur; the truth is that we have to uproot some of our thought processes that drive the decisions that run the business. There is no quick fix to this. It’s like any other gaping wound—it takes time to heal. This is a problem that is deeply ingrained in our culture and our political and business operations.

UNCONSCIOUS THOUGHTS IN THE DRIVER’S SEAT

As much as all these things may be true, the reason why we are in such a dichotomy with diversity and inclusion is because of unconscious thoughts. The unconscious thought I speak of is based on a learning model developed by Noel Burch in the 1970s. It describes the stages that people go through when learning a new skill, which is illustrated through a model titled “The Four Stages of Competence.”

Stage 1: Unconscious Incompetence. “I don’t know what I don’t know.” I will use the example of learning to drive a manual transmission car when I was younger. My brother-in-law had a 1963 VW Beetle with a manual transmission. Everyone in my family knew how to drive a manual car but me. Of course, being the youngest, I wanted to be like my



older family members, so I begged him to teach me how to drive that car. The first time I sat in the driver's seat, I thought to myself, "This is going to be easy." I had been watching him drive for a while, so I thought I knew everything. I was in a state of Unconscious Incompetence.

Stage 2: Conscious Incompetence. "I clearly know what I don't know." In this stage, you recognize there is a gap in your knowledge and are able to identify the skill that needs to be developed. As I attempted to drive the car, we stalled out at least three times before we got moving down the street, and forget it when we got on a hill. Oh boy! I had to learn how to hold the car in place on the hill by engaging the gas with just the right amount of acceleration and releasing the clutch just enough so the car would hold and not roll backward down the hill, or worse, crash into the car behind us! After a few tries, I got the hang of it.

Stage 3: Conscious Competence. "I clearly know, and I can apply my knowledge with concentration and effort." This stage is all about learning and application. Demonstrating the skill requires concentration. Every time I drove the car for the next few months, I had to think about what I was doing. Engage the clutch, turn the key, foot on the gas, engage the clutch, shift the gear...you get the drift. I had to think about everything I was doing.

Stage 4: Unconscious Competence. "I clearly know, and I can apply my knowledge without conscious effort." In this

stage, you are able to do the skill without thinking about it. A high amount of concentration is not required. I was able to get into the car and just drive. I could drive the car, sip my tea, and change stations on the radio without thinking about it. It was ingrained behavior now, meaning I could do it without any effort.

CONSCIOUSLY DEALING WITH UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

Having an understanding of the different stages of competence provides useful perspective when introducing the concept of unconscious bias, which, in my experience, is at the root of most of the underlying issues organizations are faced with today. The "quick fix" many are seeking only complicates the matter when we start considering the unconscious perspective. The people who are on the receiving end of bias are typically in the Unconscious Competence space—meaning they know it exists and are very skilled at dealing with it. It is innate knowledge learned from experience and upbringing. It doesn't mean it's easy to deal with or that it isn't frustrating. It is just their reality.

On May 25, 2020, the death of George Floyd at police hands was caught on video, an incident that shocked many in this nation out of Stage 1: Unconscious Incompetence and into Stage 2: Conscious Incompetence. That was the day it became uncomfortable for so many people because



“Diversity and inclusion expert Vernā Myers says, ‘Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance.’
How many people are you bringing to the dance floor?”

they recognized there is a gap in their knowledge and understanding, and they have to acknowledge the impact unconscious bias has on inequality in this country. Ironically, less than a month later the United States Supreme Court ruled that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity in employment.

Some still wonder why there is a push to fix everything to address discrimination. The answer is because having all this knowledge is now uncomfortable. No one knows what to say or how to even begin the dialogue with co-workers, direct reports, and colleagues—and when they do say something, they are not sure if they are being insensitive or misunderstood. The entire situation is uncomfortable. Corporations are panicking that they will lose market share if they don't put out a statement denouncing discrimination and begin to put some programs together to ensure everyone is embracing diversity.

Unfortunately, this won't go away by throwing a program at it or making a statement. Don't get me wrong. These are all good efforts, but they are not enough. For us to get to a place where equality occurs on all levels, we have to be comfortable with being uncomfortable. We have to come up with a plan to move ourselves and the organization from Stage 2: Conscious Incompetence, being fully aware of our gap in knowledge about diversity, to Stage 4: Unconscious Competence, the place where inclusivity is in our DNA.

The best definition I have ever heard for D&I comes from diversity and inclusion expert Vernā Myers. She says, “Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance.” How many people are you bringing to the dance floor?

DISCOMFORT LEADS TO GROWTH

Get comfortable with being uncomfortable so that you can have the conversations needed to gain understanding and knowledge. Being uncomfortable is the foundation of growth. Consider the metamorphosis of a caterpillar to a butterfly. If you have ever watched this process, the stage at which the caterpillar is in the cocoon transforming into the butterfly requires a lot of work. It fights and wriggles and struggles to come out of that cocoon. It is uncomfortable, but in the end

all of that work builds up the strength the butterfly needs to fully transform. If the process were disrupted at any point, the butterfly would die.

Think about it: If we move too fast out of this uncomfortable stage, our efforts will die before change can occur—and over time, if we are not careful, we will watch history repeat itself.

Also consider how much talent are we leaving at the table because of our biases. Whether the bias is based on race, gender, sexual orientation, generation, etc.—“They don't look like me; they don't work like me; they don't think like me; because I refer to ‘them,’ I don't consider them to be part of ‘us’”—these are examples of unconscious bias. The December 2019 issue of *Human Resource Executive* cites a study that shows companies with diverse management teams are 33% more likely to generate better-than-average profits, are 70% more likely to capture new markets, and generate 19% more revenue from innovation than companies with average leadership diversity.

A few months ago, I released an article titled “Leaders, You Need to Ask the Question” about how to start the conversation. In the article, which is on my LinkedIn page, I wrote that we cannot be afraid to ask a question to gain knowledge and we can't be so hypersensitive and get offended when someone does. Some of us have to be willing to be vulnerable in order for change to occur.

For most, the workplace is the most diverse place we have exposure to. The acceptance of a few can't be the norm. The value someone brings to the workplace is not determined by the way they look or how they live their lives; it is by the skills, experience, knowledge, and talent they are bringing to the table. For too long we have valued what is familiar and what is comfortable. We will never see the change we are striving for in the workplace if we can't get this simple concept. We have to become comfortable with being uncomfortable. [AQ](#)

Frederica A. Peterson is a leadership consultant, coach, trainer and award-winning author with a passion for leadership effectiveness, who knows leadership is at the heart of team performance. Her consultancy leverages all of her experience to help leaders of small to medium-size corporations sharpen their leadership skills and build high-performing teams. For more information, go to fredericapeterson.com