Ingroup privilege can drain workplaces of wellbeing and creativity

Ingroup bias can be a big problem in the workplace, hurting both employees and organisations' bottom line. ***Yolanda Blavo*** *discusses some methods that managers can use to monitor the psychological safety of employees and their ability to voice ideas and concerns.*

Privilege in the Workplace **series - The Inclusion Initiative - #TIIThursday**

Identity is critical to how people make sense of their world (Tajfel, 1978). It can shape how they perceive themselves compared to others, which can subsequently affect their attitudes and behaviours towards them (Tajfel, 1978). Social identity theory (SIT) states that we see ourselves and form our sense of selves based on the groups that we are a part of. We have an emotional connection to the groups that we belong to and see them as part of our ingroup, perceiving groups that we do not belong to as outgroups. The more we identify with our ingroup, the more distanced we feel from outgroup members (Pickett & Brewer, 2005). Moreover, when we identify strongly as an ingroup member, we tend to elevate other members in the group. This phenomenon is often defined as ingroup favouritism or ingroup bias (Tajfel, 1978), which can be characterised as a privilege issue when members are favoured, while people in outgroups are discriminated against because of attributes that they cannot change (Ruggs et al., 2011). These characteristics include but are not limited to sexual orientation, gender, ethnicity, race, religion, physical abilities, and age.

The problem with ingroup bias is not only that some people receive greater rewards than others, but also that it can lead to the mistreatment of those outside. This is called social discrimination (Mummendy & Wenzel, 1999), essentially an umbrella term for when an ingroup member treats someone in an outgroup unfairly based on the subjective perspectives of those in the outgroup. Ingroup favour and social discrimination due to characteristics outside of one's control can have serious ramifications for employees who belong to a different ingroup from their leaders and their coworkers (Heilman, 2012). Ingroup bias can lead members to stereotype those outside, making assumptions about what they are like and how they are expected to behave (Mummendy & Wenzel, 1999).

Stereotyping can cause ingroup members to negatively evaluate the potential and competency of employees (Heilman, 2012). Research has shown that stereotypes of women being less competent can put them at a disadvantage regarding promotion, salary, and assignment delegation, compared to their male counterparts (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016). When members of certain groups are consistently offered fewer opportunities than others, some can believe baseless stereotypes about themselves, which can be referred to as stereotype threats. For instance, a stereotype of women could be that they are seen as gentle and caring, while men are viewed as more assertive and direct, which can cause fewer women to attempt to achieve leadership positions (Heilman, 2012). Stereotyping can maintain imbalances between ingroups and outgroups in organisations.

In times of crisis, group-based inequalities can be intensified (Salin, 2003). Johnston & Lordan (2016) found that highly skilled black men were less likely to be employed and were paid lower wages than their white counterparts during an economic crisis. They provided evidence that racial prejudice increases approximately four per cent with every one per cent increase in the unemployment rate, showing that outgroup members' disadvantages can be intensified during times of increased unemployment. In this case, black men were perceived as a threat to the advancement of ingroup members because the labour market became more competitive. The findings in this study are supported by SIT, which states that when an outgroup member is perceived as a threat, a person will feel more strongly identified with their ingroup and is, therefore, more likely to promote other ingroup members (Mummendy & Wenzel, 1999).

Why is ingroup privilege important to address?

Employee well-being

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Knowledge of our psychological needs can help us see how ingroups can positively or negatively affect employee well-being (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004). The sense of belonging matters for well-being (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). In addition to our desire to fit in, we also have the need to distinguish ourselves from others (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004). We can balance these needs by establishing ingroups, allowing us to feel a part of a group while remaining different from other ones (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). However, when organisations do not address ingroup privilege, there can be negative consequences for employee well-being—physical, mental, and social wellness (Madera et al., 2012; WHO, 2020). Discrimination against outgroup members can negatively impact their self-esteem and lead to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, and, in the worst cases, suicide (Bernstein & Trimm, 2016). Moreover, ample research supports that discrimination due to race, sex, age, and sexual orientation is associated with employee burnout (Volpone & Avery, 2013). It can also lead to decreased job satisfaction and withdrawal behaviours such as tardiness, absenteeism, and increased turnover (Madera et al., 2012; Volpone & Avery, 2013).

Leaders' and coworkers' attitudes and behaviours towards an outgroup can influence its members' authentic self-expression at work, affecting their well-being (Ragins et al., 2007). When employees are able to present their authentic selves at work, their self-esteem and life satisfaction improve, while anxiety and depression decrease (Goldman & Kernis, 2002). Group-specific support from coworkers can play a critical role in encouraging outgroup employees to authentically express themselves (Martinez et al., 2017). This same study by Martinez and colleagues (2017) found that when coworkers recognised trans colleagues' gender in a manner consistent with their gender identity, the implied acceptance helped improve trans workers' well-being.

In contrast, mistreatment can discourage those affected from being their authentic selves at work (Ruggs et al., 2011). Out of fear of negative consequences, some outgroup members may feel pressured to suppress certain less easily noticeable characteristics (e.g., pregnancy, medical conditions, or sexual orientation) (Meyerson, 2001). However, it is not the marginalised group member's responsibility to hide aspects of their identity; it is the duty of leaders and coworkers to support marginalised groups members to be their authentic selves at work (Martinez et al., 2017).

Creativity

The ostracisation of outgroup members can decrease creativity, or problem-solving capacity, in organisations (Akturan & Cekmecelioglu, 2016, p.342; Chadefeaux & Helbing, 2012). Knowledge sharing amongst group members is imperative to enhancing creativity (Newman et al., 2017). When some members are perceived as outgroups based on their attributes, it can lead to the development of faultlines dividing members, reducing incentives to achieve organisational goals. For instance, Noelle-Neumann and colleagues (1974) found evidence that some LGBT+ employees who feel unable to fully present their identity at work feel less motivated to contribute ideas and give their opinions in general. Further, there is evidence that when outgroup members felt undervalued in terms of rewards and appreciation compared to other group members, they were more likely to withhold information that could increase creativity (Lin & Huang, 2010). This issue is important for leaders to address if they want to benefit from outgroup members' ideas (Newman et al., 2017).

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Another reason why some people may feel hesitant to contribute their ideas is social pressure to conform to what is perceived as the majority opinion (Morrison & Milliken 2003). These social pressures may generate fears of isolation (Morrison & Milliken 2003). Members of lower-status groups may view their group's attributes as a barrier to their success within the organisation (Foley et al., 2002). Listening to minority voices and considering different perspectives help groups deviate from the norm when developing new solutions, which can lead to increased creativity and innovation (Sunstein & Hassle, 2015, p. 104). That is why leaders need to create an environment that supports minority dissenting voices (Morrison & Milliken, 2003).

How can leaders use research methods to address ingroup privilege?

Psychological safety

The perception of safety in an organisation can reduce outgroup members' apprehension about expressing their identity (Singh et al., 2013). Leaders must create a psychologically safe climate, in which outgroup members feel "included, safe to learn, safe to contribute, and safe to challenge the status quo-all without fear of being embarrassed, marginalised, or punished in some way" (Clark, 2020, p.13). There is evidence that making minority employees feel valued and psychologically safe can encourage them to be more committed to the organisation (Ely & Thomas, 2001). Organisations must frequently monitor how psychologically safe their employees feel through surveys, and leaders should be held accountable for the results in their performance reviews (Tjan et al., 2017). Edmonson's 7-item psychological safety scale is a widely used measurement in empirical research (Edmonson, 1999). The questions target psychological safety at the team level, so surveys should be distributed to specific workgroups or departments to get meaningful results.

The most effective method of monitoring psychological safety in the workplace may vary by organisation (Newman et al., 2017). And although psychological safety is primarily measured using quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews can also be conducted to give organisations an idea of how certain practises help or hurt outgroup employees' perception of safety. It could be helpful to appoint an external interviewer, since employees may not be willing to share their true beliefs about the safety climate with someone inside the organisation (Newman et al., 2017). Psychological safety can also be helpful in predicting whether or not employees will voice their concerns and engage in constructive communication (Liang et al., 2012).

Employee voice

Organisations must provide an environment that supports outgroup employees voicing concerns about injustices they have experienced (Morrison & Milliken, 2003). Some people may hesitate to raise an issue at work because of the risk of negative repercussions, such as being labelled negatively. For instance, research shows that some female employees who experienced sexual harassment at work did not report it out of fear of being labelled a "troublemaker" or "complainer" (Milliken et al., 2003, p. 1463). It could be useful to regularly assess the voice climate—employees' subjective beliefs that speaking up at work is encouraged (Morrison, Wheeler-Smith, & Kamdar, 2011). Voice climate focuses on employees engaging in behaviours such as sharing their opinions or concerns (Frazier & Bowler, 2015). A frequently used scale to assess voice climate is the six-item employee voice scale created by Van Dyne and LePine (1998). Similar to psychological safety, voice climate must be measured at the workgroup level (Frazier & Bowler, 2015). A high voice climate, in which employees feel supported in speaking up, can have positive outcomes for organisations, such as increased performance (Fraizer & Bowler, 2015).

Some authors state that employee voice cannot truly exist if employees are not listened to (Van Dyne et al., 2003). Being listened to about sensitive topics, such as outgroup discrimination (Cooper et al., 2003), is especially important. People are less likely to raise a concern if they believe it will not be taken seriously (Sims & Keenan, 1998). When employees feel heard, particularly by higher-up leaders, they are more likely to speak up about organisational issues (Premeaux & Bedeian, 2003), feel more motivated, and have increased job satisfaction (Burris et al., 2013). More research is needed on communication between groups in conflict in the workplace. It could be helpful to make ingroup members aware of how their actions may be perceived as discriminatory (Pendry et al., 2007). Past studies have shown that empathy can improve intergroup attitudes; however, a change in attitude does not necessarily lead to a change in behaviours (Pendry et al., 2007). There are vast potential avenues for improving relations between ingroup and outgroup members in organisations, but the interventions mentioned above offer initial steps towards reducing ingroup privilege (Dover et al., 2020).

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