



WEDNESDAY COMMUNIQUÉ

March 4, 2015

On Unconscious Bias and what we can learn from it: Last week I wrote about the influence of our personal backgrounds on perception and judgment. I recently came upon this [example](#) on the related topic of unconscious bias: “When YouTube launched their video upload app for iOS, between 5 and 10 percent of videos uploaded by users were upside-down. Were people shooting videos incorrectly? No. Our early design was the problem. It was designed for right-handed users, but phones are usually rotated 180 degrees when held in left hands. Without realizing it, we’d created an app that worked best for our almost exclusively right-handed developer team.” This is an example of how our biases develop and become part of our subconscious cognition.

About four years ago I was introduced to the idea of unconscious bias through the works of [Claude Steele](#) and his book “Whistling Vivaldi.” More recently, I became aware of the work at Google to address unconscious bias, as seen in this [video](#). Google’s built-in biases have limited the company’s ability to recruit women and minorities, and while such challenges are typical of technology companies they are not inevitable. In fact, as the video makes clear, while unconscious biases may have helped our ancestors survive, today they limit our abilities to thrive and accept change.

This [article](#) about Google, from the Harvard Business Review, clearly illustrates how good leadership can help us see ways in which we all are afflicted with unconscious biases that limit our effectiveness and our ability to accept change. It describes the strategy that Google director of People Analytics, Brian Welle, used to move the conversation forward, essentially by nudging people though their “OK zone”: “you are willing to entertain some other views, but only within a narrow range around your own attitude — this range is the latitude of acceptance, or ‘OK zone.’” Our biases make us resist large deviations and change, and the challenge is to help people move little by little toward acceptance. Here again Brain Welle was incredibly effective: “First, he acknowledged Googlers’ identities as smart people who like data and evidence (0:30). He next encouraged audience members to acknowledge that it was possible that we all make suboptimal decisions at times — particularly about other people (0:53). He presented research (1:15) showing how people very much like his Google audience can be biased in some situations, and then (3:20) recast the notion of “bias” entirely by showing how bias can be a positive and adaptive thing, such as when it allows us to recognize dangerous animals and avoid being eaten. This let him, in short order, invite the audience to think they might sometimes show the positive kinds of bias (4:38) and then acknowledge that they definitely do so (5:00). From here, it wasn’t too big a step to helping the audience confront that they also have some biases they don’t like so much (9:27), and then that it’s worth trying to work on such biases.” What biases might be undermining our work here at the University of New Mexico?

Accreditation (Don’t Stop Reading Now): The people in our communication and marketing office can tell you about the importance of an intriguing headline, and here I have started with something like taxes: we know it’s important, but would rather someone else do it. For those of you still reading, I would like to address our upcoming accreditation process. We have begun the preparatory work for our reaffirmation of accreditation site visit with the Higher Learning Commission — the major accrediting body for our overall work as a university — in the 2018-19 academic year. As we assemble the various committees that will take on this work over the next several years it is worthwhile to consider the [history](#) and [purpose](#) of accreditation.

The six regional accrediting agencies were established in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to formalize the standards for measuring student progress, which helped universities evaluate prospective students and manage the transfer of students between institutions. New Mexico is a member of the [North Central Association of Colleges and Schools](#), which was established in 1895. The federal government took a [bigger role](#) in 1952 with the reauthorization of the GI Bill for Korean War veterans. The GI Bill created a surge of new students to U.S. colleges and universities.

The legislation created in 1952 was meant to ensure that those colleges and universities met national standards of quality.

The mission is the same today, in many respects, even while some of the reporting and processes have evolved. Accreditation is still a sign to the public that a university meets national standards of quality, and it still requires a commitment to a process of evaluation and improvement. Accreditation has serious implications for colleges and universities, as it is necessary to be eligible for federal financial aid. For those of us within the UNM community, it is especially an opportunity for a candid review of our entire institution, an opportunity to address weaknesses and grow our strengths.

The 2015 NM Legislative Session: The 2015 legislative session ends at noon on March 21. The university community lends its expertise to the legislature and testifies in support of or against many of the bills before the New Mexico senate and house. While it is a source of pride to specify affiliation with UNM, it is important to always clarify that any of us is speaking as an individual citizen or expert and not on behalf of the university.

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