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Reducing Prejudice in the Project Workplace
by Lucky Enajite Edjenekpo
Advisory Article

Reducing Prejudice in the Project Workplace in Nigeria – Suggestions for Consideration by the Project Leader

By Lucky Enajite Edjenekpo, CCP, PMP

Introduction

Prejudice is an irrational and rigid generalization about an entire category of people, place or thing for the way it acts, looks or even who or what it is involved with. It is a preconception, "pre-judging" about another person resulting from their fitting into a stereotyped category of some importance to the observer which is demonstrated by inflexible attitudes supported by little or no direct evidence. Thus prejudices are often inaccurate.

When applied to social groups, prejudice generally refers to existing biases toward the members of the social groups, often based on social stereotypes, and at most extreme, results in groups being denied benefits and rights unjustly or conversely, unfairly showing unwarranted favor towards others (Wikipedia Encyclopedia).

Prejudice refers to attitudes; it can be positive or negative, explicit (obvious) or implicit (subtle). However, it is the unintentional prejudice of the implicit nature, which is more widely used and damaging to the society.

Prejudice, whether positive or negative, are rarely favorable, because they keep people from dealing with one another or situation objectively (Clawson & Smith, 1990).
Constructive relationship building is reliant on a person's ability to learn from others differences. Failing to notice diversity in the workplace and not approaching it with an open mind is a common fundamental human error.

The problems of prejudice in the project workplace

Prejudice is an immediate by-product of social stereotyping. Stereotyping inhibits social development and group learning in the workplace.

In specific terms, display of personal prejudiced attitudes leads to the use of

- demeaning humor,
- verbal abuse,
- harassment and
- violence in the workplace

These behaviors hamper an individual's ability to develop personal relationships and networking skills in the workplace (Clawson & Smith, 1990:1).

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Institutionalized prejudice results in "Social Darwinism", a term used to describe a situation where managers recruit and hire, and select others for promotion that look and act like themselves. Although, this phenomenon has both advantages and disadvantages, the latter is more impelling for the managers to eliminate it at the workplace to achieve meaningful business growth. The disadvantages include

- promoting people who may not have the prerequisite skills and perspectives to manage the firm amidst ever changing business climate
- exclusion of talented people from contributing to the growth of the firm (Clawson & Smith, 1990:3)

Institutionalized prejudice attitude is also manifested in

- higher performance expectations for objects of prejudice
- exclusion from the management process
- slow or nonexistent promotion
- systematic exclusion from various gatherings
- greater scrutiny
- higher standards and
- awkward social encounters at the workplace

These attitudes increase the level of strained relationships and stress amongst the workforce which in turn affect productivity (Clawson & Smith, 1990:1).

Prejudiced attitudes could also lead to the following at the workplace;

- Distort organizational priorities
- Blind people to the needs of the other departments
- Drain the organization of valuable energy causing frustration and burnout
- Talented employees walk out the door or worse yet, quit but stay
- Customer perceive the company to be disorganized
- Customer relationships and sales are jeopardized
- Power struggles translate into loss of productivity
- Mediating disputes between people or departments is a waste of time – time that should be used to focus on making the business more competitive

How can the project leader reduce prejudice?

Prejudiced attitudes continue to present problems for many in the project workplace in our society today.

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Suggested ways to reduce prejudice in the project workplace are as follows:

1. **Self-Awareness**: Acknowledge that you are not prejudice-free, and thus understand how others cling tenaciously to their prejudices, and not react with anger and force when working with others to unlearn those negative attitudes. By so doing, you will increase your ability to use more cognitive effort at reducing prejudice (Rodriguez et al, 2010). Do not allow any prejudiced comment pass by without discussion.

2. **Self-Regulation**: Treat the beliefs of others with respect, although this does not mean accepting those beliefs as equally valid, as well as encourage others to do the same (Rodriguez et al, 2010).

3. **Persuasive Communication**: Engage in all forms of communication – written, verbal, visual – specifically intended to influence attitudes while taking into cognizance the following

   - The communication must be heard and credible
   - Who is giving the message
   - The message must be understood
   - Receiving the message must be a positive experience
   - The message must be retained

   Persuasive communication would yield dividends though some of the drawbacks of this   method include,

   - People who are highly prejudiced tend not to hear the messages
   - Whether one hears the message depends on why the person is prejudiced in the first place
   - Further, prejudiced people tend not to view themselves as prejudiced
   - Additionally, as prejudice becomes more subtle, the more it becomes easier to rationalize away (Farley, 2000:38-42).

4. **Peaceful Relationship**: Foster a peaceful relationship by learning to forgive and express similarity, and encouraging others to do the same. Monitoring the relationship using conscious effort to make rational judgment, and avoid stereotyping, subtype and sub categorizing groups.

5. **Education**: Become involved in intergroup education to impart information, with the latent goal of changing minds. Endeavor not to make this intergroup education put people in the defensive and under stress, but involve the participants in the process. There are a few drawbacks with this method, though. They include

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- Most prejudiced people would not take courses designed to increase their understanding of the issues
- The teachers may themselves be prejudiced and thus would find it difficult to promote a non prejudiced environment
- May not be effective if prejudice is very intense combined with personality disorders (Farley, 2000: 42-45).

6. **Simulation Exercises**: Use simulation exercises to help people who normally do not experience prejudice, experience prejudice. Thus they learn about the feelings that result from being prejudiced against, and in a direct way the irrationality of prejudice (Farley, 2000:51)

7. **Intergroup Contact** – the contact hypothesis: Encourage contact among groups in informal settings in a cooperative not competitive mood; members should be about equal in social and economic status and in their ability to perform tasks. Noteworthy too are the following points, in this regard,

   - There should be sustained close contact
   - Social norms should favor equality

   The drawback of adopting this methodology includes,

   - The reduction in prejudicial attitudes seems to occur where the contact takes place (e.g. work environment)
   - It does not always receive support, especially where the people are not of equal status, an environment of resentment may arise (Farley, 2000:45-51).

8. **Therapy**: If the person/group has personality problems, it is advisable to adopt the therapy methodology to reduce the prejudicial attitudes. The goal will be to resolve the problem that caused people to be prejudicial in the first place and to convince prejudiced people that prejudice is not an appropriate way to deal with one's insecurities or problems (Farley, 2000:52-53). However, the drawback to this methodology is:

   - If one does not acknowledge he/she has a problem requiring therapy, than he/she would not see the need to seek therapy (Anti-intraception – rejection of self-analysis)

9. **Intergroup Conflict Theory**: Encourage the adoption of super-ordinate goals by groups that reduce competition that causes prejudice.

10. **Social Identity Theory**: Merge "in" and "out" groups to form whole groups.

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11. **Corporate Social Policy** : Establishment of corporate policies that will ensure balanced power sharing, providing equal opportunities, and encouraging "one" team.

12. **Social Learning Theory**: Encourage the creation of models with punishment and intolerance of prejudice at project workplaces.

Suggested steps for changing stereotyping in the project workplace
An example of how to change prejudicial attitude of stereotyping employees on a 'functionally irrelevant' dimension of lack of ability to perform a function because the employee is from a particular ethnic background in Nigeria is as follows:

1. Acknowledge that you learned prejudicial information about this ethnic group and therefore you need to unlearn this attitude by openly discussing this misinformation
   - Becoming aware of your own 'self-talk' about other groups of people is critical in the process of changing the early stereotyped beliefs that you had learned.
   - Seeking self-understanding increases your ability to accept yourself

2. Interact with members of this ethnic group on a more personal level by:
   - Increasing your exposure to or contact with those who belong to the group toward which you have learned some prejudicial stereotypes
   - Reinforcing the dimensions of prejudice that are productive and functionally relevant and contributes to the growth of the organization
   - Developing personal relationship based on your ability to interact with others and harmonize the disclosure of personal information
   - Accepting that personal relationships are the most insightful clues to your own emotional maturity and
   - Expanding your perceptions and opening your mind to diversities

3. Confront without guilt or blame the stereotypes that you have learned. Recognize that you probably learned it before you were able to think about the information critically.

4. Commit to expanding your knowledge by:

   - Applying effort and endeavor to learn from things you do not understand
   - Exercise commitment and patience in your quest to remove stereotyping from the workplace
   - Challenge the irrationality of the prejudicial thoughts or 'self-talk' statements

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5. Interact with diverse professional contacts by:
   - Opening up learning about different cultures in business
   - Developing valuable business contact as a result of mutual sharing and respect

6. Keeping an open mind by:
   - Developing your empathy skills
   - Developing your listening skills so that you can really hear other people
   - Considering the experiences of the prejudiced employee based on his situation
   - Practicing humility

7. Making it your goal to remove prejudice from the workplace by
   - Displaying conviction to the cause
   - Setting objectives to keep you motivated
   - Making it your goal to succeed

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