![Partners in Equity & Inclusion logo]

UNDERSTANDING & PREVENTING
STEREOTYPE THREAT

What is Stereotype Threat?

Hundreds of studies have shown that when something in situation calls attention to one or more of a person's group identities (e.g. woman, black, elderly, white male) and cues awareness of a stereotype associated with that group (e.g. bad at math, unintelligent, feeble, racially biased), they are at risk of experiencing the negative effects of stereotype threat.

What negative effects?

- Behaving in ways that confirm the stereotype.

- Lowered performance on cognitive (e.g. math, problem-solving, chess) , physical and/or interpersonal (e.g. negotiating, social) tasks.

- Dis-identification and disengagement with task, career,organization, profession.

- Anxiety.

- Physiologic stress effects (e.g. sympathetic nervous system activation, raised blood pressure, heart rate variability, inflammation).

- Lowered ambitions.

- Quitting

What are some examples?

• Simply asking the gender question at the beginning (vs. at the end) of a math test lowers performance in women and girls. Danaher & Crandall estimated 4700 more girls a year would receive AP calculus credit if the question that asks about the student's gender was moved to the back of the test.

• Black test takers performed worse than white test takers when told it was a test of intelligence. When told test was a lab task that did not indicate intellectual ability, black and white test takers performed at same level.

•White golfers did worse than black golfers when told they were taking a test of "natural athletic ability". Black golfers did worse than white golfers when told the test required "sport strategic intelligence".

•When female chess players believed their opponent was male they performed worse than male chess players. When they were told (falsely) they were playing against another female they performed as well as male players.

• Men did worse on a test that assesses accuracy in interpreting others' expressive behavior when told it was it test of"social sensitivity" than when told it tested "complex information processing".

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Does stereotype threat contribute to failure of D&I efforts?

Triggering "white racist" stereotype threat has been shown to increase anxiety & have negative cognitive and behavioral consequences in whites, including:

- Physically distancing themselves from African American conversation partners.
- Fidgeting, avoiding eye contact.
- Impaired of working memory caused by monitoring or regulating behavior to avoid appearing prejudiced.
- Temporary increases in implicit (unconscious) racial bias.
- Desire to avoid interactions with African American conversation partner.

Who is at Risk?

Everyone belongs to at least one group that has a stereotype relevant to at least some situations.

Diversity Wheel, adapted from Loden, Marilyn. Implementing Diversity. Ed. Jeffrey Krames. United States: Irwin Publishing,

When are we at risk?

➡ There is potential for stereotype threat whenever a group we belong to is associated with a stereotype that is relevant to the situation.

➡ We do not need to be consciously aware that we are experiencing stereotype threat to suffer negative effects.

➡ We are at higher risk of experiencing stereotype threat when the task or situation is important to us than when it is not.

➡ We are higher risk when we interact with people who consciously or unconsciously endorse the negative stereotype. People tend to be highly sensitive to cues indicating that one of their identities might be devalued so cues can be very subtle and still trigger stereotype threat.

➡ We are at higher risk when there are few others who are members of the same group (e.g. few women or minorities)

➡ We are lower risk when the task is very easy for us.

You Can Protect Yourself from Stereotype Threat

✦ Identify the situations & people that are most likely to trigger stereotype threat for you. You may not realize it is happening - so pay attention to your level of anxiety, your body sensations.

✦ Think about your personal unique characteristics, skills, values, or roles. These are the things you value about yourself, that are important to you. If possible, jot them down & why they are important. Let your attention be filled with, your deep, core values.

✦ Remember that even if you are triggered—you find yourself "de-skilled" - you can bring yourself back.

✦ Remember that the anxiety and "de-skilling" caused by stereotype threat is not relevant to your actual abilities.

✦ Activate "alternate identities" or group memberships.

   ✦ Everyone has multiple identities/belongs to different groups. You can use the identity wheel on page 2 to start thinking about all your different groups and identities .

   ✦ Bring to mind and focus on an identity that does NOT have negative stereotypes that are relevant to the situation

✦ Bring to mind a time you felt competent, powerful, strong (whatever is relevant). Focus on experience – take on that identity in whatever way makes sense to you.

You Can Protect Others from Stereotype Threat

✦ Examine your immediate environment for stereotype-reinforcing or triggering images, documents, artwork. Remove. Add counter-stereotypic imagery, artwork, documents etc.

✦ Emphasize tasks and abilities as skills that can be learned. Focus on growth, not fixed ability.

   ✦ State that no one group is better at task than another (just telling girls that girls and boys do equally well on a test eliminated stereotype threat.)

✦ Develop a partnership - emphasize things you have in common - to create a sense of a "common in-group identity". Feeling part of your in-group lowers threat, increases safety.

✦ Teach about stereotype threat and remind people that when they feel anxious or temporarily unhappy with lower-than-expected performance, it could be stereotype threat and is NOT related to their actual ability.

✦ Help others see low performance as situational, malleable or temporary. Counter impression that it is due to some fixed characteristics they have - again, take a growth perspective.

✦ Encourage self-affirmation - that is, encourage others to think about their characteristics, skills, values, or roles that they value or view as important. Ask them about their deep values; what matters to them.

Organizational Strategies to Prevent Stereotype Threat

Assess and Address Environmental Cues

Is there anything in the environment that subtly or overtly suggest that some groups belong and others do not? Anything that reinforces cultural stereotypes?

- Since we are blind to our own culture and class, convene environmental review groups with representatives from all stakeholder groups. Explain problem and ask them to conduct a review. To promote safety, ask several teams comprised of members of the same stakeholder group to work together to conduct review.

Examples:

- Décor

- If there are TVs in waiting room, what channel is usually on? Whose taste does that reflect? How members of different groups portrayed?

- Brochures and Pamphlets

- Choice of magazines or other material in waiting rooms. Consider - who would subscribe to this magazine and who would not?

Develop and Disseminate an All-Inclusive Multicultural Diversity Philosophy

- Develop and widely disseminate a diversity philosophy that explicitly recognizes and values contributions from all groups, majority and minority. Ensure all employees (minority and majority group members) report feeling included when they read/hear the philosophy.

- In many cases, organizations will have to help employees understand why the organization is moving away from a color-blind philosophy. Many have been taught that a color-blind philosophy is needed to promote group equality and may be initially confused by the an all-inclusive multicultural philosophy.

Assess HR Policies and Procedures for Stereotype Threat Triggers and Address Them.

- Write job descriptions and performance standards in a way that does not unintentionally evoke negative stereotypes about a group.

- Develop evaluation procedures that specify measurable outcomes and specific behaviors. Reduce evaluation criteria that depend on the feelings of the evaluator(s).This may reassure employees that they are less likely to be judged in terms of specific stereotypes.

  - African American and women leaders are generally well aware that behavior that is entirely acceptable for a white leader may be interpreted and experienced as aggressive and disturbing (associated with race stereotypes) and/or abrasive and unpleasant (associated with stereotypical beliefs regarding appropriate behavior for women).

  - If possible, conduct evaluations in a way that allows the evaluators to be "blind" to employee group membership (age, race or ethnicity, gender etc).

Train all Supervisors in a Feedback Style Shown to Reduce Stereotype Threat

There are 4 key things that supervisor must communicate:
  - High standards for the employee's performance
  - Belief that the employee can live up to those standards.
  - Mistakes or failures are learning opportunities and necessary for growth.
  - Mistakes or failures are not due to some fixed characteristics of the individual (e.g their core abilities, "having what it takes", their personality).

Provide Universal Training for All Employees

  - How protect themselves from stereotype threat (see "You can protect yourself from stereotype threat").
  - How to prevent stereotype threat in others (see "You can protect others from stereotype threat").

References: Click here: Scientific Studies on Stereotype Threat or copy and paste the following URL in your browser: http://www.p-e-i.org/st-references/