

Activity: Changing an Organization's Culture¹

This activity/assignment uses a reading from The Atlantic to highlight the potential ways an organization might work to change its culture and in this case focus on diversity and inclusion.

Ask students to read the article by Jessica Nordell, "How Slack Got Ahead in Diversity," The Atlantic, April 26, 2018.

Article Synopsis

In the article, Nordell describes the efforts by Slack to create an organizational culture that supports diversity and inclusion. Slack made conscious choices in the hiring and interviewing processes to address implicit bias that often limits diversity in organizations. Additionally, Slack has made diversity a focus of the company's organizational culture. For example, Slack doesn't have a diversity chief, which Nordell argues seems to suggest that for Slack diversity is intertwined with the company's overall strategy. Additionally, Nordell highlights the recruitment efforts that Slack has used to find a diverse candidate pool for their jobs. Nordell concludes that while Slack's HR choices might seem less obvious than more explicit diversity and inclusion statements, the impact on Slack's organizational culture has been profound.

Teaching Objectives

- To help students understand the ways that human resources policy decisions effect diversity and inclusion within an organization.
- To introduce students to the ways in which an organization can work to change organizational culture.
- To prompt students to think about what role they can play in changing an organization's culture.

Assignment Questions for Students

1. **What are some examples of implicit bias? According to the article, what role can implicit bias have in hiring and promotion practices?**

Implicit bias is when "people unconsciously hold attitudes toward others or associate stereotypes with them."² There is a lot of research that highlights the role that implicit bias can and does play in hiring and promotion practices, while also offering suggestions for best practices to mitigate and/or eliminate implicit bias.³ In the article, Nordell highlights several ways that implicit bias can have an impact on hiring and promotion practices by describing the processes that Slack is using to try to overcome the barriers to diversity created by implicit bias and prejudice such as names on resumes, recruitment pipelines, language in job descriptions, interview processes ("the whiteboard interview) and practices (inconsistent questions during the interview process or inconsistent criteria applied to candidates during the interview process).

2. **What are the ways that Slack is trying to create an organizational climate that supports and sustains diversity and inclusion? What areas could Slack continue to improve on in their efforts to create and sustain a culture that supports and celebrates diversity and inclusion?**

Nordell describes several different things that Slack is doing to try to eliminate bias in their hiring practices, including recruitment of candidates outside the traditional tech pipeline, training employees in how to conduct interviews, creating criteria to be applied to all candidates for a job and developing "blind review"

practices for all job application materials including coding challenges. Many of Slack's practices reflect the suggestions for best practices coming from research on mitigating implicit bias in hiring processes. As the article notes, Slack still has challenges. In particular, Nordell notes that while Slack seems to be successful at hiring people from diverse backgrounds, the company continues to struggle to retain those they employ. One suggestion for Slack would be to look at the hiring practices that have been working well for them and apply what they have learned there to their promotion practices.

3. What can newsroom leaders and followers do to change or create an organizational culture that supports and sustains diversity and inclusion?

First, leaders and followers need to understand the organizational culture as it exists. For example, paying attention to the different elements that already circulate within a culture can help leaders and followers identify what needs to be changed and what can be sustained. Once identified, these dimensions of organizational culture need to be critically evaluated to determine which are problematic and need to be changed and which should be bolstered. Second, leaders need to lead positive change in organizational culture. Change is hard — all the research about organizational culture points to that reality. But it can be done. Leaders can change culture through their own actions and behaviors as well as through policies and practices. What leaders say and do and the values their behavior models send signals and shape organizational culture. Likewise, leaders can use the fundamentals of ethical, effective human resources management to change culture. For example, as Nordell's article highlights, hiring and promotion practices are particularly valuable to leaders seeking to change culture. As another example, recognizing and rewarding certain employees — formally or informally — communicates and reinforces what is valued. Ensuring that those hired, promoted, recognized or rewarded are people who can contribute to an ethical, functional culture and who support and value diversity is vital to changing organizational culture.

Resources for Further Discussion and Supporting Materials

For a quick and insightful introduction to implicit bias and the role it can have in hiring and promotion decisions, see the [Ethics Unwrapped: Implicit Bias section](#) of the Ethics Unwrapped curriculum from the Center for Leadership and Ethics at the University of Texas at Austin, McCombs School of Business.

The following videos can be shown in class after the discussion or can be assigned as background for the discussion of the article on Slack's diversity efforts:

- In the video "Debbie Hiott of KUT on Leading Organizational Change," Hiott describes the work she did to understand the existing organizational culture when she took over as general manager at KUT and her efforts to change the organization's culture.
- In the facilitated presentation and discussion "What Works: From Good Intentions to Effective Action," Siri Chilazi of the Women and Public Policy Forum describes what organizations can do to mitigate things like implicit bias and create change in journalism to advance gender equality.

¹ This activity was developed by Dr. Jennifer L. Jones Barbour as the basis of class discussion

² Ethics Unwrapped: Implicit Bias, part of the Ethics Unwrapped curriculum from the Center for Leadership and Ethics at the University of Texas at Austin, McCombs School of Business: <https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/video/implicit-bias>

³ Wynn A.T., Correll S.J. (2018) "Combating Gender Bias in Modern Workplaces." In: Risman B., Froyom C., Scarborough W. (eds) "Handbook of the Sociology of Gender." Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76333-0_37; Dandar V.M., Lautenberger D.M. (2021) "Organizational Strategies to Support the Culture Change Necessary to Sustain Salary Equity." In: Gottlieb, MD, FACP A.S. (eds) "Closing the Gender Pay Gap in Medicine." Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51031-2_6; Davenport, Dayle, Al'ai Alvarez, Sreeja Natesan, Martina T. Caldwell, Moises Gallegos, Adaira Landry, Melissa Parsons, and Michael Gottlieb. "Faculty Recruitment, Retention, and Representation in Leadership: An Evidence-Based Guide to Best Practices for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion from the Council of Residency Directors in Emergency Medicine." *Western Journal of Emergency Medicine: Integrating Emergency Care with Population Health* (2022).