

by Boyd Byers

Freakonomics, The Weakest Link, and Implicit Bias

Ask your employees if they're bigoted, and odds are that 100 percent of them will say no. Most of them will believe they're answering truthfully. But are they more biased than they realize?

'Freaky' about discrimination

In his best-selling book *Freakonomics*, economist Steven Levitt uses statistics and economic theory to examine matters of everyday life. One of his observations is that the TV game show *The Weakest Link* presents "a unique laboratory to study discrimination." The game, if you're unfamiliar with it, involves contestants who answer trivia questions to win a single jackpot. After each round, the players vote to eliminate one other contestant.

Levitt analyzed more than 160 episodes of *The Weakest Link* to assess voting bias. Black and female contestants, he found, were voted off at a rate consistent with their skill at answering questions correctly. But Hispanic and elderly contestants were consistently discriminated against, although each group was discriminated against in a different way.

Hispanic players suffered from "information-based discrimination," meaning other contestants viewed them as poor players even when they weren't. They were more likely to be voted off in the early rounds (when the voting strategy is to get rid of bad players) but less likely to be eliminated in the later rounds (when other contestants want to keep weaker players around because they pose less of a competitive threat).

Elderly players, on the other hand, appeared to be victims of "taste-based discrimination." They were more likely to be eliminated without regard to their playing skills in both the early and late rounds. Other contestants (the average age on the show is 34) simply didn't want them around, it seemed.

Levitt suggests that the typical contestant isn't even aware of his discrimination toward Hispanics and the elderly. He's nervous. The game is fast-paced. And who wants to appear bigoted in public?

Hidden bias in the workplace

Is it possible that your managers — and even you — harbor subconscious biases? A recent study by a Harvard-led research team suggests that most people are more prejudiced than they think. The team developed the Implicit Association Test (IAT), a Web-based test designed to detect bias based on factors like gender, race, age, religion, national origin, and disability. According to the researchers, test takers had a significant implicit bias against minorities and other stigmatized groups, even though most claimed they had no prejudices. Interestingly, minorities showed the same biases as majority groups.

Bias in and of itself isn't discrimination. Discrimination occurs when employment decisions are based on bias. So how do you keep managers from acting on biases they don't even know they have? (Who knew employment law could be so esoteric?)

Detect. Conduct statistical analyses of your hiring, promotion, and compensation practices to see if any disparities exist. Regress experience, education, time in the job, and other nondiscriminatory factors that may account for differences. Use a lawyer well versed in statistical analyses to conduct or oversee your study to protect it under the attorney-client privilege.

Control. Train your interviewers and give them structured interview questions so that all candidates are asked the same thing regardless of their demographic characteristics. Use standardized processes and objective criteria established in advance to make your hiring and promotion decisions. Provide your managers with the tools to conduct objective and quantifiable performance evaluations.

Confront. Teach your managers about the concept of hidden bias. Alerting them to the possibility of inherent preferences may help them scrutinize their behavior when they exercise judgment and make decisions. Provide diversity training and implement team-building exercises. The more interaction employees have and the better they get to know each other, the more likely they are to judge one another as individuals.

They said it

"If morality represents how we would like the world to work, then economics represents how it actually does work."

— Publisher's notes to *Freakonomics*