UBS

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"We don't just want to be nice to each other"

What's behind the boom in courses where managers discuss equal opportunity and their unconscious biases?

The seminar has an esoteric air about it. Eight line managers of a bank discuss their unconscious biases. What biases do I have? How do they influence my professional decisions? What role do they play in the recruitment and composition of my team, in daily meetings or promotions? The external training coach Jeremy Lewis guides UBS employees in Zurich through the three-hour seminar. "Yet another diversity seminar," is what some of the participants might think at the beginning of the course. That at least is the impression you get if you try to read their faces. "Diversity and inclusion rules restrict me in the decisions I make as a line manager every day," is one of the criticisms Jeremy has to address.

It's not just about hiring more women or people with different cultural backgrounds, he says in response to such objections. Diversity and inclusion is much more about creating an environment where everyone can be successful. "The people in the team who generate the best results are the ones who should be hired and promoted," says Jeremy. But if someone looks differently or behaves other than expected, then we tend unconsciously to deny they possess the required abilities, he adds. "In that way we may miss out on precisely the talent we need in the company." Once we are aware of these biases we can take a step back and make more objective assessments and better decisions, he says.

Biases hold us back

"We don't just want to be nice to each other," says Jeremy. Rather, diversity and inclusion should help us maximize business results, not least, as digitalization and automation require diverse talents and ways of thinking. Diversity is also important in client contact. Research by the consultancy Capgemini has confirmed a large gap in perceptions between wealth managers and the needs of their clients – especially when it comes to the young generation. In one survey, 76% of wealth managers said they understood and could meet the needs of affluent younger private clients. But only 61% of these clients agreed with this statement.

Diversity and inclusion seems to have become a magic word in many companies and HR departments. Big companies in particular are currently outdoing each other in setting up diversity positions, inclusion teams and courses to teach their employees about the advantages of a diverse and inclusive corporate culture. Whether it's Novartis, Swiss Re, UBS, Credit Suisse, Raiffeisen or Hilti – they are all trying to maximize the potential of a mixed workforce – whether in terms of gender, culture or age.

UBS, for example, has launched a series of unconscious bias courses worldwide for line managers in its Wealth Management division. "UBS has 10 years' experience with unconscious bias training and is investing a lot in such courses," says Carolanne Minashi, Global Head Diversity at UBS. These form an important part of the jigsaw in the corporate strategy to create an inclusive, diverse culture, she adds. "We all have biases that hold us back." For example, Minashi talks about line managers who often assume that women returning to work after maternity leave no longer have professional ambitions and are less career focused. But that is often not the case, says the diversity expert. "They are generally as ambitious as before and want to be promoted." That's why it's important that managers speak with all their employees about their career plans, she says.

Under the title, "UBS Unique" UBS Wealth Management has developed a clearly defined business strategy with the goal of attracting more female clients and to better understand their investment needs, while also expanding UBS's market share in this demographic. But for this, UBS also needs teams that are more diverse. Clear diversity targets also form part of the performance goals by which UBS line managers are measured. "It's not enough to make managers responsible for this; we also have to ensure they can reach these targets – through our trainings for example," Minashi says.

Keeping mothers in the company

When it comes to performance evaluations and promotions, unconscious biases can play a significant role. “They explain in part why women are not considered for management and technical careers and are often passed over for promotions,” says Michael Federer, Head of Human Resources Management at Raiffeisen Schweiz. “No one ever says: ‘I did that on purpose.’ That's because gender-biased assessment often happens unconsciously and why it’s important that we bring these issues up with managers and explain to them how this mind-set works.”

Raiffeisen established a Diversity & Inclusion unit 10 years ago, and since 2012 has been following a clear goal, just like UBS. Both banks want to increase the percentage of women in their workforce, at Raiffeisen to 30%. Federer admits that Raiffeisen has not yet reached this target. Over the past five years, the number of women in the bank’s manager pool has only increased to 24% from 22.7%. “The slow development is a hard nut to crack,” says the HR expert, while adding that you have to make sure that “gender fatigue” doesn’t set in. To determine the best method to promote women, the bank has worked together with the University of St. Gallen to analyze its anonymized internal HR data. The result is a D&I dashboard with key data on gender distribution in recruiting, seniority level, training and development, promotions, management roles and job leavers.

One of the interesting findings is that becoming a mother is not a major reason for leaving the bank. The most important reason for leaving the bank was the desire by women for a career change. “We need to give women more opportunities,” says Federer. Some of the measures Raiffeisen has rolled out include career development planning for women with management potential, job postings for management positions with a part-time option of 80% to 100% or using job-leaver interviews for gender-related findings. Managers are also made aware of the issue through diversity targets and unconscious bias training. Thanks to this data, Raiffeisen has gained insights on where it can have the biggest impact for greater inclusion. “We aren’t doing this for its own sake, but because we want to attract qualified employees, while maintaining a low turnover rate. Though greater diversity in the teams, we hope to produce improved risk assessments and solutions,” says Federer.