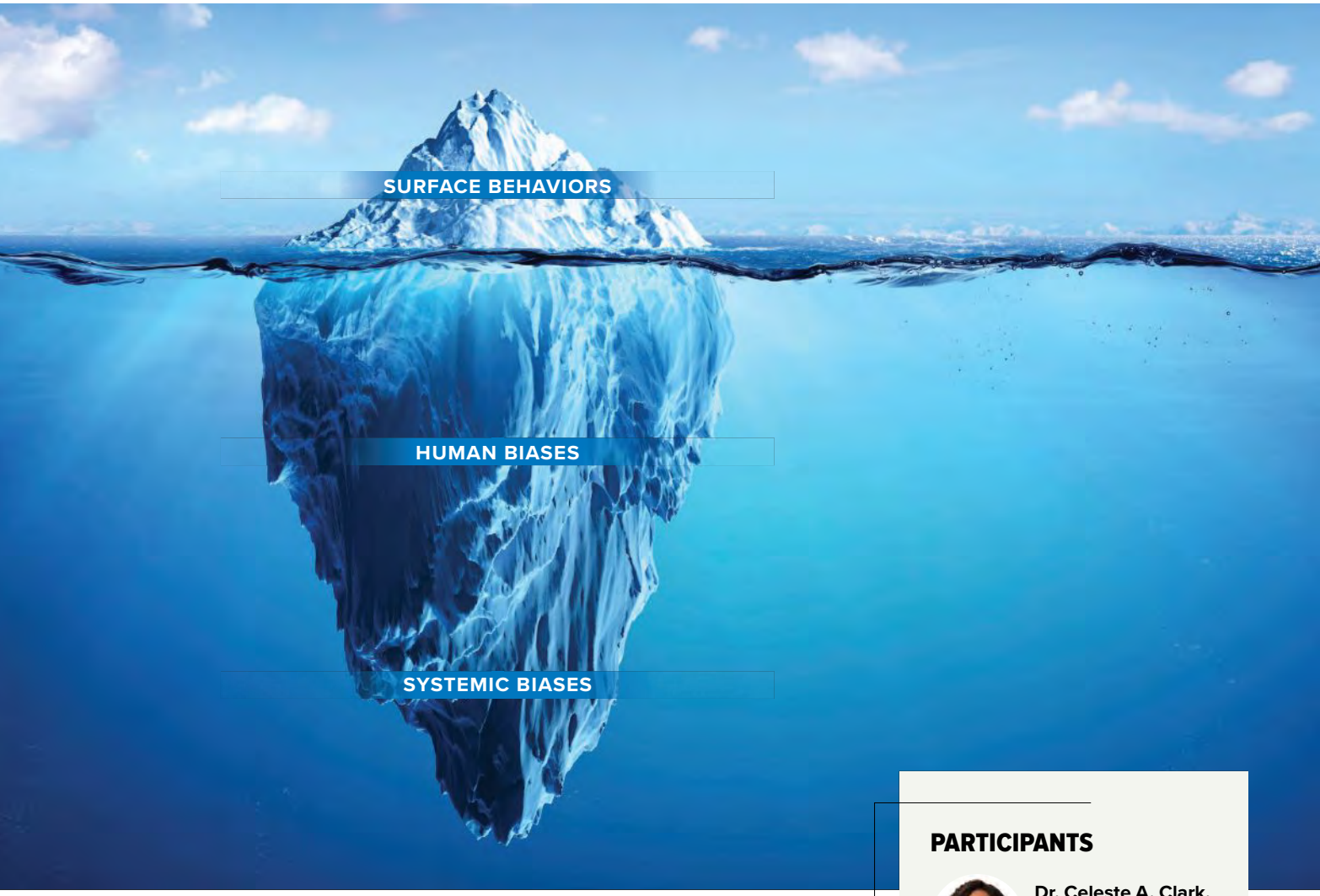

Micro-Moments: Unmasking Bias at Work

As executives and board members, we've all been guilty of overlooking micro-moments at work that are rooted in unconscious bias. These moments may seem small when looked at as one-offs, but their frequency and normalcy can create potential landmines. Dawn Zier joined two experienced board members to discuss why and how leaders should be intentional in stopping such behavior in its tracks.

PARTICIPANTS

Dr. Celeste A. Clark, board member at Wells Fargo, Hain Celestial Group, Prestige Consumer Healthcare, and Darling Ingredients

Lori Tauber Marcus, board member at Fresh Del Monte Produce, 24 Hour Fitness, and Primo Water Corporation

MODERATOR

Dawn Zier, former CEO of Nutrisystem, director at Hain Celestial Group, Prestige Consumer Healthcare, and Acorns

Q & A

DAWN ZIER: Lori, in the book you co-authored, *You Should Smile More* (City Point Press, 2022), you share that microaggressions are much more prevalent than one might think. They happen at all levels of corporate America, including the boardroom. Can you elaborate?

LORI TAUBER MARCUS: We've all been guilty of committing these microaggressions and micro-moments. For the most part, we're unaware that we're doing them, as they're part of our unconscious bias. They're small things, seemingly inconsequential, but they add up. In our book, we shed light on some of the more common microaggressions that we have all witnessed and how to address them.

For example, "Who's the new girl?" The notion of calling women "girls" in the workplace reduces them. You would never say, "Oh, we just hired a new boy out of Yale." Yet, we hear women referred to as girls all the time. No one's waking up in the morning saying, "I'm going to hold women back at work by calling them 'girls.' " It's unintentional, but language matters.

Another one of my favorites, which is actually the title of our book, is, "You should smile more." I've seen comments like these end up in women's performance appraisals. I've also heard the other side: "You should smile less." This goes hand in hand with comments along the lines of "She's too emotional" or "She's too sensitive." Marry these up with the cousin of those comments like, "He's a great guy." All these statements are nonspecific, lazy language. But the implication is understood. Overly generalized comments create a headwind in one case and a tailwind in the other.

Here's an example we've all observed in the boardroom. We call it "Great idea, Greg." Let's say Tammy makes a point during the meeting and the conversation quickly moves on. A couple of minutes later, Greg says a version of the same idea. Everyone jumps on it and says, "Great idea, Greg!"

No one is actively planning to talk over Tammy's idea and give credit to Greg, but it happens all the time. We encourage anyone that observes these micro-moments to politely acknowledge Tammy and bring her back into the conversation.

Then there's "Dad of the Year." In this case, Susie has to leave work early to take her kids to the doctor, resulting in her missing an important meeting. The unspoken question is: Can she juggle motherhood and her career? But when a father leaves early to take the kids to the doctor, he's viewed as Dad of the Year.

In all these examples, we're talking about well-intentioned people of all genders. But you can see unconscious gender bias woven throughout all of these scenarios.

DR. CELESTE A. CLARK: I think it's so important to acknowledge that microaggressions are not just gender-related. We often see micro-moments tied to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and physical appearance.

ZIER: I agree. As the CEO of a weight loss company, I tried to bring awareness to the negative bias that overweight and obese people face. I once had a CHRO of a large company tell me that if two equally qualified people were applying for the same job, he would hire the thinner candidate. I also have heard snickered comments about what receptionists should and should not look like. And perhaps there is no better example than the requirements that flight attendants had to adhere to, including weekly weigh-ins. Thankfully, that's a thing of the past.

CLARK: One of my least favorite microaggressions is "The Training Wheels." This is when you get promoted into a role, but instead of getting full responsibility for the role, you have to crawl before you walk. It's only after you demonstrate you can crawl that you get a bit more leeway until you earn the right to full accountability. I've observed that this spoon-feeding of responsibility happens more to women. The intent is to help set the individual up to succeed as opposed to fail. But in doing so, our credentials that clearly state we're able to do that role are undermined.

Then there's the "Outside-Inside Syndrome." This is where you have the role as the title, but information is withheld from you as part of that

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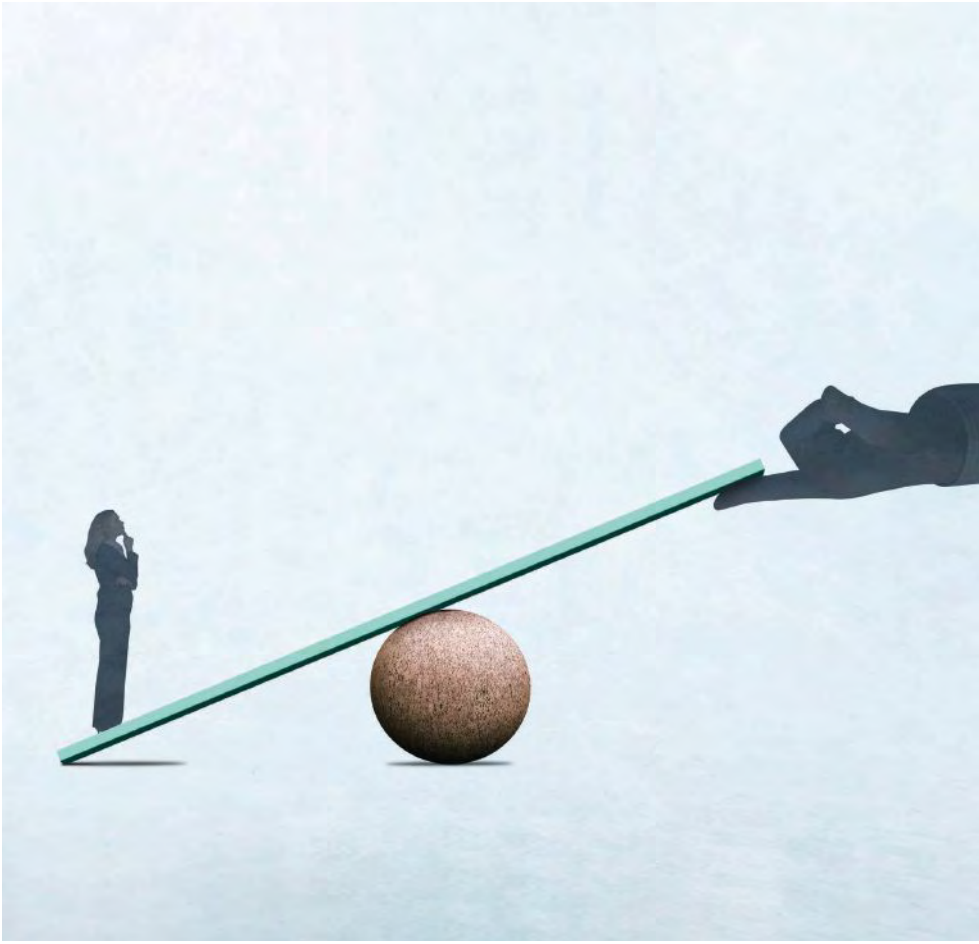
—DAWN ZIER

position. This results in it taking you longer to get your sea legs because you have to learn the inside baseball. This is an overt microaggression.

A similar example is "The Work-Around." This happens when you are in a position of authority, but you have subordinates or colleagues that—instead of trusting your agency for a decision—will go around you to get opinions from other people on what they think should happen.



ZIER: I've personally experienced the two scenarios you just outlined. It happened when I got placed in a role that the person who now was reporting to me thought he should have gotten. He actually told his team not to give me any information that I asked for and also told them not to meet with me. That created a very awkward situation for all involved. He also often went around me, going directly to the CEO for decisions that really were mine to make. CEOs should not tolerate this type of behavior, as it can undermine productivity and create cultural distress.

Another example a colleague shared with me that created an unintended micro-moment was "The Golf Outing." This was a team-building activity for the executive leadership team, which was largely [composed] of men who golfed and women who did not. Feedback after the event was mixed. Instead of bonding as equals, some of the female leaders felt they were unintentionally put in a subordinate position as the men took on the role of instructors. We have to carefully think about the impact on all when it comes to activities that could be viewed as gendered. Imagine the reaction if a female CEO took her predominantly male leadership team out for a spa day consisting of manis, facials, and massages.

One of the most head-scratching micro-moments I experienced was when I was at a CEO leadership summit. It started out as a very positive, feel-good experience of people standing up and thanking someone else in the room for something positive they had done. It quickly took a weird turn toward the end when the CEO asked all the women in the room to stand up. He proceeded to thank us for all our hard work and impact, acknowledging that we as females had a lot to juggle on both the professional and home fronts. The men all clapped for us, and we just stood there in shock. Well intended, perhaps, but tone-deaf.

MARCUS: Again, what we observe in this example is positive intent but how it lands really matters. Impact trumps intent. I can imagine that the CEO thought he was being gracious and

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inclusive, but the result was what we call "othering." Instead of making the women feel like they were part of the group, it separated them out as others.

ZIER: One of my frustrations is the disservice that I often see women doing to themselves. Sometimes, it's rooted in mindset differences. Sometimes, it's how we present ourselves. And often, it's a failure to leap. What have you observed?

MARCUS: Women apply for 20% fewer jobs than men do. As women, we likely have all experienced bouts of imposter syndrome. We question whether we are truly qualified and ready when an opportunity presents itself. We analyze and are self-critical. We don't apply unless we can check most of the boxes.

Men come at it from a different angle. They often consider themselves ready for a role if they fulfill 50% of the qualifications and assume they'll learn the rest on the job. There's a chapter in our book where we tell women to "Be Like Bill." Jump right in and figure it out as you go. You do not need to know everything on day one.

CLARK: I think it's also important to note that there is often an unhealthy competitiveness between women. We don't always support and lift each other up. It's interesting that when you ask women who their mentors are, very few have female mentors or sponsors. In this day and age, that's really sad. There should be a sense of pride that a female is in an authority position to mentor and an acknowledgment that our mentoring came from someone who worked extremely hard to get this role and knows the importance of reaching back to help others.

ZIER: The language of the boardroom is male. It is concise, unflowery, and spoken in bullet points. It is also highly effective. This is a lesson every woman should embrace as an executive or as a director.

Early on in my CEO tenure, my coach told me that I had a lot of words that I needed to get out. He would say, "Why does it take you a hundred words just to tell me the sky is blue?"

Being concise and to the point was something that I practiced until I mastered it. No one wants someone filibustering in the boardroom. Time is precious. People hear you better when you speak with brevity and in sound bites.

THE NAME GAME: SUBTLE FORMS OF UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

Definitions of some workplace microaggressions cited in this article:

THE TRAINING WHEELS: When a qualified person (often a woman) gets promoted into a role but has to demonstrate additional competency before being given full responsibility.

THE WORK-AROUND: When a person is put in a position of authority, but subordinates or colleagues go around them instead of trusting their decisions.

"GREAT IDEA, GREG": When an employee (often a woman) makes a point in a meeting and then, a couple minutes later, a colleague (usually a man) says a version of the same idea and hears a hearty, "Great idea, Greg!"

OUTSIDE-INSIDE SYNDROME: When a person has the job title, but information is withheld from them as part of that position, forcing them to spend time playing office politics.

DAD OF THE YEAR: When a woman gets side glances for leaving work early to take her child to the doctor, but a man is viewed as Dad of the Year for taking time to handle child-related issues.

THE GOLF OUTING: When team-building activities favor one group over the other. These events often put men in the role of instructors and women in the role of subordinates.

OTHERING: When one group is called out and made to feel separated from the rest.

EXCUSING THE BRILLIANT JERK: When excuses are made for someone who exhibits toxic behavior and erodes the organization's culture because that person delivers strong results.

"As goes the CEO, so goes the culture. When you bring in a new CEO or you're looking at succession planning, you have to look at things beyond performance. You need to look for red flags, such as Glassdoor ratings, above-average employee turnover, and a performance-at-all-cost mentality. ... If you just look at the 'what' and overlook the 'how,' don't be surprised when the culture takes a turn."

—LORI TAUBER MARCUS

ZIER: One of our roles as directors is to provide oversight to help prevent the company from becoming an unwanted headline in *The Wall Street Journal*. What do you think your role as a director is for ensuring that microaggression is not impacting the overall culture of the company?

CLARK: Every board needs to give attention and focus to the culture of the organization. The amount of time that boards spend on this has increased since the pandemic. Directors should be looking at culture surveys and pulse-check surveys, studying patterns, and [examining] positive and negative shifts.

It's important for the CEO to set up opportunities, both formal and informal, for the board to engage with employees, especially at levels immediately below the C-suite. I call this "kicking the tires" to get a real sense of the corporate culture. Finally, directors should be asking probing questions around behaviors and gaps when the CEO talks through their talent review and succession plans with the compensation committee or full board.

MARCUS: The most important thing a board does is to hire and fire the CEO. As goes the CEO, so goes the culture. When you bring in a new CEO or you're looking at succession planning, you have to look at things beyond performance. You need to look for red flags, such as Glassdoor ratings, above-average employee turnover, and a performance-at-all-cost mentality.

When reference checking, don't forget to get input from individuals that worked for them, along with peers. If you just look at the "what" and overlook the "how," don't be surprised when the culture takes a turn a number of years down the road.

I also sit on compensation committees, and I make sure that we look at pay equity studies and not just intentions around pay.

ZIER: Going back to your point, Lori, of looking beyond performance, I've too often witnessed CEOs and C-suite executives giving unacceptable latitude to those high-performers that always deliver results but at a steep cost to culture. I call this "excusing the brilliant jerk." Usually, this is someone the leader strongly relies on. And while acknowledging that there is collateral damage that often appears in the form of HR complaints or higher turnover, the leader is reluctant to make a personnel change, believing the individual is indispensable and "fixable."

As a director, I have no tolerance for excusing any form of toxic behavior due to the corporate risks it creates, the negative impact on team productivity and culture, and the credibility hit it brings to those leaders who fail to act.

ZIER: Over the last five years, inclusion and diversity has been an initiative, to varying degrees, on almost every company's agenda. Now, we are seeing some pushback. Do you think these initiatives are about to take a step backwards?

MARCUS: When I read about companies that are walking away from diversity initiatives, I wonder if they ever really understood the value of them in the first place. These were the companies that added chief diversity officers just because it was in vogue, but they failed to put in place clear mandates that tied directly back to a business rationale. If we look at the performance of a lot of these companies, it's unlikely that they're top-tier.

This is also why culture matters. Culture and diversity initiatives are not about trying to make people feel better. Diversity of thought driven by different backgrounds and experiences results in teams that challenge each other to think differently and do more. From a business mindset, culture matters, because when employees are more engaged and feel valued, the company performs better. At the end of the day, it's quite capitalistic.

CLARK: Diversity and inclusion simply make good business sense. It is not a flavor of the month nor the year. These should be fundamental principles that create a learning and productive work environment where employees are engaged and deliver results. I suspect that given the recent Supreme Court ruling, companies that are truly committed will not retract from their commitment. Rather, what is likely to change is the narrative and the way we talk about the issue.

My hope is that these programs will not only remain intact, but that companies will lean in and be diligent about making sure we have environments where all people feel they belong, can contribute, and can bring their whole selves to work.