

## Reducing Bias Through Awareness, Opportunity and Being in the Room

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*A young person will never achieve something they can't imagine being possible.*

Over the past decade, researchers, educators, activists and sociologists have written mountains of literature about how bias adversely affects social interaction, creating microaggression and resulting in discrimination and lost opportunities for people of color, women, people with differing abilities, and people of different socioeconomic classes.

Bias has a way of working against diversity and inclusivity by limiting opportunity and shading our interactions with one another in ways that are unhelpful and limit choice. Biases tend to close doors rather than open them and contributes to discrimination and adverse economic outcomes for many people. (Dasgupta & Saha, 2022)

As adults who live and work in diverse situations, we have seen bias in action. The work to create greater self-awareness has been a positive development in our society. Reducing bias toward others can unlock potential by fostering stronger, more mutual relationships, identifying greater opportunities and value within colleagues, and discovering talent and expertise that were there all along.

While we talk a lot about bias and the importance of recognizing biases within ourselves, we don't talk enough about the negative impact that biases have on those who have been subjected to them for decades. Those who have lived without opportunity and access for so long may find their development hindered, and this can blind them to opportunities that others see and take for granted.<sup>1</sup> Self-limiting bias is particularly damaging among young people and can stifle progress toward achieving goals, which results in adverse economic outcomes. (Celestine, 2015)

Self-limiting bias among young people is what I want to focus on today, as breaking this cycle holds the greatest potential to create meaningful economic opportunities and social change. Moreover, we have tremendous power to personally and significantly make a difference.

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<sup>1</sup> [Andrew Blackman](#) describes "self-limiting bias" as assumptions or perceptions that people have about themselves and how the world works that holding them back. (Blackman, 2021)

## Self-Limiting Bias Among Young People

Over the past four decades, I have been involved in creating internship opportunities for thousands of young people who have faced difficult situations, many of whom came from communities where there have been limited opportunities and access to economic resources.

As Comptroller of the Currency, I stood up the federal agency's first summer intern program for high school students from around Washington, D.C. We focused on students of potential rather than the best and brightest whose future success already seem relatively assured. We welcomed a couple hundred "at promise" students into our offices for several weeks each summer. At the start of the program, it was common to hear some express self-limiting biases, such as:

"I can't do that."

"They don't want me."

"People like that don't want me around."

"They don't really care."

"Nobody from my neighborhood does *that*."

"We don't get the resources that others get."

These biases develop for the same reasons that biases develop in the minds of the majority—a history of differences and disparities. Like many biases, self-limiting bias can be created by and reinforced by lived experience.

I don't want to understate or minimize the hardships and experiences of anyone. Biases like these are rooted in material experiences and real-life events that many of us can't imagine facing at any age. But, as those experiences become biases, they manifest in ways that discourage young people from trying, from applying, and from thinking outside their neighborhoods.

Self-limiting bias can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, leading to the same adverse outcomes that biases held by the majority can cause—unfulfilled potential, loss of economic opportunity, and perpetuating cycles of disparate outcomes. Self-limiting bias cause people to self-select out of the economy.

### **Our Own Bias Compounds the Effect of Self-Limiting Bias**

As adults and generally successful individuals, when we encounter young people with biases that affect how they see opportunities around them, our own biases come into play too.

“That student has low self-esteem.”

“That young man needs more confidence.”

“She will never make it with that attitude.”

“Those kids are lazy.”

“Why don’t they care.”

We have all been in situations where we’ve have heard statements like these. Unfortunately, some allow their biases to affect their behavior, attitudes, and interactions, rather than pausing to realize that these students may have never seen the inside of an office building. They may have never witnessed a team meeting conducted with respect, open collaboration, and dialogue among people of such diverse backgrounds. They might have never imagined the many ways people can contribute to the workforce, let alone envision themselves doing it.

### **Breaking the Cycle of Self-Limiting Bias**

The great news is that this cycle of bias can be broken in powerful ways by exposing young people to opportunities. When they see that they belong, realize they share many similarities with those who they thought were completely different, discover opportunities they never imagined, recognize their potential for success, and encounter people who care, the cycle can change. It is even more powerful when young people can see someone who looks like them, came from the same place as them, or has similar life experiences.

Returning to my experience as Comptroller and the hundreds of students who began their summer internships timid, reserved, uncertain; after six weeks many of them had reinvented themselves and what they imagined for their futures. They realized that the world was their oyster.

As a side effect of bringing students into the workplace, biases among many adults who interact with them begin to change. The negative comments about “*those students*” fade, and skeptics start to recognize the students’ personalities, dreams, futures and potential.

By the end of the summer, you can see the change in the students, in the employees involved, and even in many of the students’ families.

How do I know?

Every year we concluded the summer with an event to recognize the interns and their experiences over that summer, and we invited the families. Parents—who were suspicious about the opportunity at the beginning, who questioned their child’s involvement at a federal agency that they never heard of—applauded and cried that their children saw new opportunities that their internal biases prevented them from seeing before.

Most importantly, though I keep evidence of the positive change these sorts of experiences can make on people. For instance, I keep a letter from one of the first “graduates” of our program in my backpack and pull it out every so often, read it, and smile.

### **Call to Action**

I believe that meaningful change can happen. Biases can be destroyed in the same way they are created—through experiences that build awareness.

As Comptroller, I issued a personal challenge to my colleagues who headed other agencies to offer similar programs. Now, as CEO, I would like to issue a similar challenge to business leaders: find opportunities to put young people in situations where they can see what success looks like and discover opportunities beyond what they think are their horizons.

Opportunities like internships, on any scale, can change participants’ mindsets and reset bias and expectations. While these programs require resources, offering them is a business decision that should align with your company’s capabilities and needs. The ROI may not always be immediately visible or positive, but the impact can be lasting. Business leaders have a powerful opportunity to change the course of the lives of young people by ensuring that interns see diverse representation throughout their company, so they know that career advancement is possible for them.

I also want to encourage policy makers to find ways to recognize the long-term value and positive effect of these types of programs and look for ways that they can incentivize, encourage, and support these efforts.

After all, if a young person can see it, they can dream it and be it.

## **References**

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