RIT Town Hall Session: February 27, 2015

Leveraging Difference to Advance RIT

DEBRIEF

As part of an ongoing series of ‘unconscious bias’ education and professional development to expand the capacity of RIT to meet the goals of the 2014 Strategic Plan, the AdvanceRIT team hosted a workshop for the RIT Town Hall Meeting on February 27, 2015. The RIT strategic plan presents inclusion as an economic imperative with the objective of an inclusive campus to insure that students and faculty alike can fully contribute to and benefit from being with Rochester Institute of Technology.

The purpose and objectives of the February 27 workshop was to

- Build awareness of and appreciation for RIT objectives to attract, retain and graduate a more diverse population of students, and become a model for inclusion for faculty and staff.
- Recognize the benefits of inclusion; and that we all have unconscious bias and can become conscious of our perceptions and behaviors, to become ambassadors for inclusion.
- Recognize motivators for the institutional objective as well as the relevance/importance of the objective to participants—professionally and as members of their departments.
- Understand that bias is essential to all selection processes—when biases used are intentional. Unconscious biases can result in unintended outcomes. The RIT strategic plan presents a number of desired outcomes. Check biases to see if they work in favor of those objectives.
- Identify biases that are necessary and good for the university, build on processes (norms) that support desired outcomes, and adapt norms necessary to prevent unintended outcomes
- Understand the influence that we have to affect biases and outcomes. We need awareness, skills and mindfulness to change the way we do things, but we already have the basic skills and strengths.

The workshop was short and deliberately fast-paced, moving from one activity and debrief to the next. There were three main activities within this 2-hour workshop and the intended audience included RIT faculty, staff, and administrators.

The speakers shared personal stories throughout the workshop—illustrating a potentially harmful situation that is mitigated by a small, mindful action of a colleague. This activity illustrated the power of mindfulness and small actions by individuals at all levels of the organization.

Workshop Speakers

J. Haefner, Provost opened and closed the session, establishing the connection between the workshop and RIT Objective III.8: RIT will reflect diversity and inclusion as core values in assessing performance and promotion at all levels and in all functions of the university.

Relevant workshop objective: Build awareness of and appreciation for the RIT institutional objective to attract, retain and graduate a more diverse population of students, and become a model for inclusion for faculty and staff.

M. D’Arcangelo Director Diversity Education Diversity & Inclusion introduced the concept of social groups and norms. Norms are the glue that keeps groups together—how they know who belongs to the group and who doesn’t. Some groups are formed as a function of who you are (e.g., gender, age, ability, family, status, etc.), and others you chose to join (e.g., community groups, professional associations, book
club etc.). It is human nature to want (and need) to be part of groups, and we rely on norms to define group identity.

**Relevant workshop objective:** Recognize that inclusion is beneficial for all; and we all have unconscious bias. Unconscious bias is not reserved for dominant group members. We can all become conscious of our perceptions and behaviors, and become ambassadors for inclusion.

**L. Manning, Intercultural Economist and Economics professor** led activities in the workshop. Even if we fault existing norms, remember in the beginning they were established by group members for group members (based on their biases, which is a good thing), and all groups do it. When things change, norms need to change accordingly. But there is resistance to change because it’s the way we do things around here, even if we don’t know how that happened. At RIT, changes in student and faculty populations and socioeconomic realities outside the institution mean that the institution’s characteristics and needs are changing. So norms must change; and to change norms, we have to examine our biases, because they need to change too.

We think Bias is bad, and we tend to feel attacked when the subject is biases. We prefer what we know, and we know the norms. Norms are learned, reinforced and rewarded by the group—until they become ‘second nature,’ and we view them as ‘the way we do things,’ and don’t question their effectiveness.

**M. Bailey, Professor, Mechanical Engineering** hosted the session with support of funding from the National Science Foundation (NSF). The AdvanceRIT project team and allies across campus are positioned as key resources to support the work of reviewing norms and biases at RIT to consider which are still effective and which may be limiting potential growth and advancement of faculty, staff and the institution. This workshop is one of the activities hosted by AdvanceRIT.

**Workshop Activities**

**Activity 1: SOCIAL GROUPS AND NORMS—Expected Behaviors**

Participants at each table were assigned a ‘social group’ and asked to list the *behavioral expectations for that group*. Not an easy task. Norms for behaviour are unconscious (second nature) so we to describe norms instead of behaviors. As an example, one group was engineers. *Behaviour norms* identified were: quantitative approach to solution; more analytical; problem-solver, smart, nerd, professional, tinkerer. From the discussion that followed, the following insights emerged from the group of participants:

- Descriptions are not the same thing as behaviours. We can fall into a stereotype trap easily.
- Group norms are not the same thing as what the individual chooses to do. Norms are what the group expects of you.
- Different groups have their own norms; members know what they are even if they can’t articulate them easily.
- These norms are learned (often unconsciously), reinforced and rewarded. Successful members of the group are those who learned well and have been rewarded often. They will usually not be the first to change.
- We belong to multiple groups, and we move easily from one to the next, which means we already have the skills necessary to adapt our behaviors to different norms without losing our core.
- Newcomers to the group must learn to adapt. Existing members of the group must realize they had to go through the same process, and should not view the newcomer’s behavior as a ‘failed attempt at being them.’ This is the real harm of unconscious bias.
Relevant workshop objective: Recognize that inclusion is beneficial for all; and we all have unconscious bias. Unconscious bias is not reserved for dominant group members. We can all become conscious of our perceptions and behaviors, and become ambassadors for inclusion.

Activity 2: MOTIVATE ME — a.k.a. The Business Case

Participants were asked to identify ‘what’s in it for me’ for achieving Objective III.8. The activity was managed the same way as in the Department Heads, Chairs and Directors meeting workshop on February 6, 2015, with similar results, i.e., participant responses revealed the social justice, compliance and self-interest motivators for the objective. In addition to understanding the different motivators, this activity helps to bring the work of inclusion to a personal level.

There are three broad motivators for creating an inclusive campus. Social Justice is a strong motivator. When we discover that that the ‘way we do things around here’ can cause harm to others, we want to change. But just knowing that we should change and wanting to change are not enough to insure change. If we rely on awareness of social injustice, we may trigger resistance, as those who unintentionally committed injustices feel guilt and regret, but lack the knowledge and skills to change.

Compliance is a powerful motivator—particularly for changing unacceptable and overt acts of prejudice and discrimination. Alone it can create a significant number of other problems and resistance. Compliance tends to motivate us to meet the minimum requirement. Decisions about hiring and promotion are complicated. Compliance is essential as a baseline, but we must move beyond compliance to insure that the best and the brightest are hired and retained.

From an economist’s perspective, Self-Interest is a compelling and sustainable motivator. In conjunction with social justice and compliance, faculty and staff at RIT can quickly recognize why an inclusive campus is in their best interests (as demonstrated by the Department Heads, Chairs & Director’s Meeting Workshop on February 6, and the Town Meeting on February 27).

Relevant workshop objective: Recognize motivators for the institutional objective as well as the relevance/importance of the objective to participants—professionally and as members of their departments.

Activity 3: WHAT CAN I DO?

Periodically throughout the workshop, speakers told personal stories about a time when they didn’t understand norms and how to fit in, and got help from a colleague.

Participants were presented with a unique case study describing an academic setting, and a situation that could impact the subject’s career. They were asked to choose a social group identify for the case subject, and to look at the case through the case subject’s eyes—putting themselves in that person’s shoes for the duration of the exercise. Participants were asked to answer the following questions:

- Attributes and Strengths
  In your case, what evidence is there that you are on track to meet research expectations for tenure and are fitting into the campus and community?
  Each table reported on the social group they represented and how they answered the two questions and found evidence of being on track and fitting in (i.e., desired biases identified)

- Norms & Expectations
  What kind of ‘social norms’ do your colleagues seem to be following? Do your colleagues have bad intentions?
  Tables reported at least one social norm observed (associated with academic settings)
• **Consequences & Risks**
  What kind of *unintentional* consequences might result in this case? For you and for the department/institution?
  Tables reported at least one unintended outcome (i.e., checking to see if biases are undesirable)
  Are there risks to you if you decide to address the situation?
  Risks were reported for the case subject (suggesting that established members of the group may be able to influence biases and outcomes).

• **Action Plan**
  With respect to this case, *what 3 small actions/steps* could any one of your colleagues have taken *before* or *since* ‘you’ were hired, that might have contributed to your career progression? (i.e., small steps that established members of the group can take to influence biases and outcomes).
  Each table of participants was asked to report for one minute—identifying one norm, one unintended outcome and two simple actions that represented an adaptation in norms. Participants were encouraged to think about their circles of influence and how they might become more aware of norms, biases, intended and unintended outcomes and small steps they can take.

**Relevant workshop objectives:**
• Understand that bias is not a bad word. In fact, it is a necessary element of all selection processes—provided the biases used are intentional. Too often, we carry unconscious biases that result in unintended outcomes. The RIT strategic plan presents a number of desired outcomes, so it is important to check biases to see if they work in favor of those objectives.
• Identify biases that necessary and good for the university, build on the processes (norms) that support desired outcomes, and adapt norms necessary to prevent unintended outcomes
• Understand the influence that each of us has to affect biases and outcomes. It requires some awareness building, skill building and mindfulness to change the way we do things, but we already have the basic skills and strengths.

**Conclusions**

At the end of the session, Linda summarized the objectives of the session, findings and the take-aways.
• Being a model of inclusion at RIT serves the advancement, promotion and satisfaction of all members of the institution and the institution itself.
• Unconscious bias comes from norms that were learned, reinforced and rewarded by our social groups to the point where they are second nature and we forgot learning them. We all have these biases and norms because all groups develop them.
• Norms support group goals and are built on group characteristics, strengths and needs. When any of those things change, norms may not be as effective.
• Build necessary skills for change using the same method used for learning the norms and biases initially, but intentionally and mindfully. The workshop provided practice with cases:
  o Identify strengths to build upon
  o Identify social norms at play
  o Take note of unintentional consequences
  o Identify and implement *simple* steps for change