

CHAPTER 1

Guilty Perpetrator Versus Hapless Victim—Why Virtually All Unconscious Bias Training Fails

This is not about guilt or innocence. The point is, it's time to turn a page.

—Charlie Luken (American Democratic politician)

Stop Drinking the Kool-Aid

The allure of Edwin Perkins's colorful Kool-Aid drink invented in 1927 and sold to what is now Kraft Foods has been the source of hundreds of millions of dollars of revenue for decades. And yet this same Kool-Aid was pivotal in the mass murder of hundreds of deluded followers of the cult leader, Jim Jones, at the Jonestown Massacre. From this terrible event, the warning emerged against imbibing something—whether a thought, an idea, or a position—*just because everyone else is doing it* (Zorn 2008).

One can't help contrasting the global allure of guilt and pain as a launch pad for equitable diversity-and-inclusion solutions—including for unconscious bias in the workplace—as a fool's paradise and recipe for disaster. This is because the emotion of guilt has and will always impair our vision to *what's really going on* and *what needs to be addressed* to effectively tackle unconscious bias in the workplace.

The problem is that we're all drinking the “guilt Kool-Aid,” and it feels so great and tastes so good. But in this context, my preference is to drink water. Like the great Nigerian jazz musician and father of Afro beats, Fela Kuti, with the song title, “Water, No Get Enemy,” the reference is that

water runs clear, without the baggage of guilt. It's pure. It doesn't carry guilt or innocence. It correlates to doing what's right and fair.

To me, choosing water rather than giving in to the tempting sweetness of Kool-Aid is the perfect metaphor for starting with *fairness* in addressing workplace unconscious-bias-related issues, as opposed to starting from *guilt*.

Why is this important? When you start from a place of fairness or equity in addressing unconscious-bias-related misdemeanors, you're not saddled with guilt for the "sins" of your forefathers and the advantages these have afforded you (nor the pain of minorities affected by those sins). The sins I'm speaking about in relation to the White majority include those we've all learned in school and heard in the news, such as slavery of Black ethnic minorities of African origin. Such concepts of historical discrimination can be extended to other minorities and marginalized groups, such as women and people with disabilities.

To be clear, I'm in no way minimizing the horrific impact and consequences of slavery. I'm not absolving anyone of responsibility for discrimination that they actually committed. But being a descendant of someone who grossly discriminated doesn't make you guilty by default of those same sins. It just makes you a descendant.

If you buy into a mindset of personal guilt for the past—especially as a leader—you'll never address workplace bias effectively. Instead, you'll always launch your solutions from the wrong starting point. Your wisdom will be clouded by guilt, perceived or otherwise, and you'll come up with the wrong answers.

A case in point is the recent trend—propagated by many celebrated, so-called thought leaders, experts, behavioral scientists, and academics—to conflate social injustice problems and solutions *out there* with workplace-bias problems and solutions *in here* (meaning the workplace, which is what this book addresses). There's a slight crossover, but for the most part, workplace-bias problems and related solutions are different than those outside of work (even though both have root causes in negative societal conditioning driven by social injustices).

Change Is an Inside Job

When you equate workplace bias with broader social injustice *out there*, you disempower marginalized groups *in here*, because your solutions

begin and end with the need for leaders in authority to change something (e.g., government leaders must change laws and policies). Yet we should not have to wait for these broad, external changes—which are outside of the marginalized groups’ control—before finally experiencing prosperous careers or psychological safety in the workplace.

Instead, as you’ll see in later chapters, effectively navigating workplace bias requires a collaborative solution led by the sensed victim—who may be the traditional member of a minority or marginalized group, or even a member of the majority.

You can’t possibly see or accept this potential change *in the moment* if you approach workplace bias from a *guilt* mindset, as a member of the majority. Nor can this happen if you operate from a *pain* mindset, as a member of a minority or marginalized group—relating your workplace-bias solutions to problems of social injustices *out there*. The following scenarios will serve as examples.

If minorities or marginalized groups are victims of aggravated assault, physical attacks, or police brutality, their only recourse is to seek change and compensation via the authorities—often via the perpetrators themselves, in the case of police brutality. Or they may lobby for change in laws via government representatives, activists, or peaceful protests. Positive change and protection can only come by leadership-changing laws or legal redress.

When it comes to workplace bias, minorities and marginalized groups are very unlikely to be victims of such horrific aggravated assault or physical attacks (and if they are, then yes, they of course must address it with the broader forces who can initiate change). Because these situations don’t require outside intervention, there’s a wider scope for collaborative resolution to the perceived unconscious bias. **Victims of workplace bias thus don’t need to rely solely on the sensitivities of the traditional perpetrator or leadership to create equal opportunity and bridge the disproportionate underrepresentation gap. They can actively navigate bias and build more prosperous careers, if equipped with the right skills.**

When it comes to navigating workplace bias, there’s no place for broad social injustice guilt and its models of resolution. In fact, those will ultimately hinder the equal opportunity minorities and marginalized groups deserve—by obscuring and impairing our vision in resolving workplace-bias problems.

Instead, when drinking water instead of Kool-Aid, you'll still look to right the wrongs of the world and your own environment. But you'll do it through the window of fairness, clarity, and effectiveness. This window won't be colored by guilt, pain, or the past. Instead, your vision will be unimpaired, and as such, the solution will become simple.

For instance, we're all familiar with stories of parents who, in a bid to make up for many years of hardship and being unable to support their children with the preferred lifestyle, overcompensate by showering their kids with expensive gifts. This reaction is born of guilt—for depriving their kids of *the nice things they deserved* growing up. This is the parents' way of making up for the past.

Sooner or later though, the children become addicted to the presents, and the parents become tired of providing more extravagant gifts. When the parents stop the flow of presents, the kids resent their parents—which makes the situation worse than ever.

If the parents instead had demonstrated fairness and clarity (providing water instead of Kool-Aid), they would have realized this: *all that their kids ever wanted was love, and gifts are a poor substitute for that love.* The parents didn't see this, however, because their overwhelming emotion was guilt. This emotion impaired their vision to the real solution, which was spending more quality time with their kids. The amazing thing is this: the true solution is something they could afford all along, showering them with love instead of expensive presents.

What does that concept look like when applied to dealing with person-to-person unconscious bias or *microaggressions* (subtle or indirect statements, actions, or incidents of workplace discrimination against minorities—which I will explore more in later chapters)? The solution is straightforward: **Wherever possible, we should seek to address unfairness, however it presents itself. We should look to bridge the fairness gap between the majority and minority.** This can be done by:

- **Equipping the minority with the wherewithal to fend for themselves,** as opposed to inadvertently making them

perpetually reliant on the “perpetrator” for handouts, sensitivity, or emotional support.

- **Equipping the majority with skills to address both accurate and inaccurate perceptions of bias toward them.**

This may be related to the majority’s unfair advantage and propensity to act from unconscious bias toward minorities.

As a result, the potential for tensions is removed from both sides, because the cognitive shortcuts (unconscious biases) that led to that tension are removed in the moment—before they can do damage.

The allure of the Guilty Perpetrator Versus Hapless Victim model is easy to understand. It relieves the perpetrator’s guilt and gives the victim a temporary feel-good factor—a bit like the parent–child dynamic we discussed. But ultimately, it leaves minority victims as hapless victims reliant on and addicted to the sugar-rush-like goodwill of the perpetrators. It also leaves perpetrators in a perpetual state of guilt, which eventually turns into resentment born out of guilt or bias fatigue (resentment at compensating for past racial misdemeanors).

Multiple sources have quoted Charlie Luken—Cincinnati, Ohio (United States), Democratic Mayor—in relation to the 2001 Cincinnati riots against police brutality as saying: “This is not about guilt or innocence. The point is, it’s time to turn a page.”

Chapter 1 Summary of Key Points

In this chapter, we learned the following:

- Whenever you seek to address workplace bias from a guilt mindset as a majority leader or pain mindset as a minority/marginalized person, your wisdom is clouded and you come up with the wrong answers.
- Wherever possible, we should seek to address unfairness in whichever ways it presents itself in the workplace.
- We should look to bridge the fairness gap between the majority and minority. As a result, the potential for tension is removed

from both sides, because the cognitive shortcuts (unconscious biases) that led to that tension are removed in the moment—before they can do damage. This can be done by:

- Equipping those in the minority with the wherewithal to fend for themselves, as opposed to inadvertently making them perpetually reliant on the “perpetrator” for handouts, sensitivity, or emotional support.
- Equipping the majority with the wherewithal to address the natural hostility aimed toward them, perhaps due to the majority’s unfair advantage and propensity to act from unconscious bias toward minorities.