

Recognizing and Understanding Implicit Bias: A Necessity for First Responders

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How we perceive the world is based in part on our cultural experiences and upbringing. These perceptions, which begin early in life and develop over a lifetime, reflect our feelings and attitudes about others based on race, ethnicity, age, appearance, and other characteristics. They're often reinforced by our ongoing exposure to the media, especially TV news.

These automatic judgments and mental shortcuts are known as "implicit biases." Because these stereotypes are so deeply rooted in our subconscious, most of us are unaware that we have them.

Inaccurate Assumptions and Discriminatory Responses

The word *bias* has many negative connotations. However, it's important to note that *implicit biases* are a normal human response. Everyone has them. They form the *subconscious* lens that shapes our view of the world. As such, implicit biases are different from the racist thoughts or beliefs that some people *consciously* hold.

While implicit biases are vital to helping us categorize our world and quickly interpret the people and the situations we encounter, they also can create blind spots that prevent us from seeing vital pieces of information. Consequently, implicit biases can lead to inaccurate assumptions – and discriminatory responses.

How to Counteract Implicit Biases

Effective leaders need to help others understand and become aware of implicit biases. It's an important first step in creating a more just and equitable society. One of the best ways to develop this awareness is through implicit bias training. It not only helps people to recognize and confront their biases, but also to develop a deeper understanding of cultural differences and nuances, especially those related to historical and complex trauma.

Studies show that people are at greater risk of being influenced by implicit biases during stressful or distracting situations, or when making decisions with vague or questionable information. Consequently, managers and first responders are more likely to be influenced by implicit biases when faced with a crisis, tight deadlines, or difficult personnel decisions.

Diversity Training

When it comes to emergency response, diversity training helps first responders recognize implicit biases when facing emotionally charged, highly stressful situations. It also can help them manage challenging people and situations accurately and fairly – and respond appropriately. This, in turn, allows them to build positive and trusting

relationships with the individuals and communities they serve.

Building a Diverse Workforce

Building a diverse workforce can also counteract implicit biases. To accomplish this, it helps to have special recruitment and retention policies in place and develop community partnerships and initiatives. Getting input on decisions, policies and practices from people with diverse cultural backgrounds and life experiences helps curtail implicit biases. Making an effort to learn as much as they can about the cultures with which they engage fosters a feeling of welcoming acceptance between first responders and unfamiliar communities.

Conclusion

While biases are a natural subconscious response, training can help first responders and other emergency management professionals overcome these blind spots. By helping your organization develop a greater understanding of implicit biases and by building a diverse staff, you'll not only create a stronger and more resilient workforce but also strengthen relationships within the communities you serve.

To learn more about implicit bias training or to schedule training for your workforce, please contact us at info@feinet.com. ▲

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