Nudging the Unconscious Mind for Inclusiveness
Tinna C. Nielsen & Lisa Kepinski, October 2014

The Inclusion & Diversity (I&D) business case is clear and most leaders support for it. We rationally understand it. As a next step, many organisations are focusing on raising unconscious bias (UB) awareness in an effort to foster an inclusive culture. Yet, why don’t the right intentions and efforts lead to greater results? The authors, Tinna C. Nielsen & Lisa Kepinski, assert that a rational understanding of the business case and UB awareness is not enough to truly realize the needed cultural and behavioural change.

Brain researchers estimate that the unconscious system of the brain controls about 80-90% of our responses and actions [1]. We make many unconscious implicit associations which limit our perception. For example, often the word “leader” is implicitly linked with White Western men, and we struggle to picture leaders beyond this view. These types of connections are unconsciously embedded in all of us and affect our own and organisational behaviours much more than we think. In terms of creating a diverse and inclusive culture, the unconscious brain is one of the biggest challenges for organisations and leaders in the 21st century. It is time that we put an end to the argument that “time will change the status quo” or a belief that “with the next generation, diversity and inclusion will no longer be an issue”. Research clearly shows that the unconscious system of the brain has not evolved much, and certainly not kept pace with dynamics in our current complex, global society. Successful organisations and leaders in the 21st century will be those that manage to help the brain make more inclusive and objective evaluations and choices, and one that can realize on our good intentions.

Inclusion Nudges in the Practice of Inclusion & Diversity

Kepinski & Nielsen argue that behavioural changes towards more inclusiveness require that we “outsmart” our brain. Both have used the techniques of behavioural economics, e.g. Nudging [2] and Switch [3], to succeed with this change.

A behavioural nudge is a relatively soft and non-intrusive mental push that changes the way the brain makes choices and behaves. The authors have developed a framework for a specific kind of nudges that they design to promote more inclusiveness in their organisations. They call these “Inclusion Nudges”[4], which are practical interventions that motivate, create buy-in, shift the mode of thinking, and target key choice points in organisational-, thought- and change- processes to mitigate unconscious bias and guide the thought process towards more objectivity. They are designed to gently push the brain in the direction of inclusiveness without incentives or punishment.

In 2013, the authors joined forces to further develop and share their framework of these techniques with the purpose of inspiring as many people as possible and creating a global...
sharing initiative. Designing these nudges is something everyone can learn and all internal agents of change ought to master. It has the capacity to profoundly change the way practitioners address inclusion and diversity.

Examples of Inclusion Nudges from various organisations

The authors work with three (3) types of Inclusion Nudges that target challenges in various stages of the employee lifecycle, organisational culture, and team culture.

1. “Feel the Need” Inclusion Nudge

The intent of this type of Inclusion Nudge is to make people (the brain) feel the need for change rather than having only a rational understanding of the need for inclusive behaviour. This is about motivating by tapping into feelings. One way to do this is using so-called “eye-opening” experiences, e.g. by showing and illustrating the status quo and the implications of our actions and decisions instead of talking about it. This is about telling the motivating story hidden in the data. This is about showing what we lose instead of talking about what we gain. This is also about mobilizing a group of people to influence an individual in the direction of more inclusiveness (sometimes called the “follow the herd” dynamic).

I&D leaders tend to be well-versed with their data (internal employee demographics & external benchmarking). Yet despite how often they share data with leaders, it tends to not be the sustainable catalyst for a lasting organisational shift. All too often, the data creates distance from the topic and it gets lumped with other day-to-day monetary/data decision making processes rather than treated as human/organisational culture topic. Also, at times, I&D leaders have seen the data request be used as a form of resistance through leaders continuously asking for more data but not moving towards personal change leadership and action ownership. Experience and research bears out that both the emotional side and the rational side of the brain needs to be linked for deeper commitment to action.

So in addition to data, a focus on raising visibility on the impact of exclusion can be very useful. There are various formats that can be designed to share employees’ experiences when they did not feel included and generate a discussion on the resulting loss implications on engagement and productivity. These “Feel the Need” Nudging techniques have been used by both authors with great effect on senior leadership support and drive for change and on significant behavioural changes in middle management. The emotional experience triggers a deeper commitment and more sustainable results than only showing the data/numbers. “Feel the Need” Nudging techniques can help to round out the view on inclusion in the organisation and trigger greater commitment to change.

2. “System/Process” Inclusion Nudge

The intent of this type of Inclusion Nudge is to help people (the brain) make better decisions by altering elements in organisational processes. This is about helping the unconscious & automatic system of the brain make less subjective evaluations, reduce the complexity at key choice points, leverage diversity of thought, and make more objective
decisions. It is about changing ways of working, tweaking the process or practice and laying out alternative choices, e.g. by changing the default and asking people to opt-in instead of opt-out.

With this type of nudge, I&D leaders team up with the system or process owners to examine where there are critical choice points which may be introducing biased decision making and impacting the results with a lack of inclusion. The authors feel strongly that this type of deep dive review on the root cause of core issues and identification of key decision points is one of the principle areas where the practice of I&D needs to focus on much more. Often, the authors see across the I&D field a tendency to seek out so-called “best” practices, apply them to one’s own organisation, and yet find little change resulting. For example, just look at how many organisational mentoring programs have been aimed at women, sometimes over decades, yet with very little increase of women in top executive levels (certainly not in proportionate to the number of women who have been through “women’s mentoring” programs). It would be far more effective to examine and identify what are the key reasons for less women at the top, then find out what are the choice points where fewer women in the pipeline are seen, and design a nudge on that choice point which would generate better decision making and more inclusive results.

In Ms Kepinski’s experiences, one of these related to the requirement of international assignments for promotion to senior-level roles. This is a good expectation for development of global leaders. Yet the review she conducted showed significantly less women opting in for expat opportunities. Digging deeper on this revealed that the point where women dropped off was on the internal talent profiles where there was a question, “Are you open to an international assignment?” A majority of women high potential (hipo) talents responded with “no”, whereas a majority of male hipo talents responded with “yes”. Further investigations revealed that most women answered that question with a view of their life at that moment, rather than in the future (“I can’t possibly do this now, I have these commitments.”, “I would struggle with family needs.”, “I am not ready”, etc.); whereas, most men answered that question with a view of the future (“When the chance comes up, then I’ll see if I can make it work.”, “There’s nothing concrete now, so why not say yes? I don’t want to limit my career.”, etc.). This revealed a very different way of perceiving the question, and resulted in far less women talents in the pool for international assignments and subsequently in the pipeline for senior executive roles. So, the question was changed to “Would you be open to consider an international assignment at some point in the future?”. This simple “System/Process” Nudge resulted in a much higher response rate from women talents than previously ever seen before (and no decrease in the male response rate).

Another example of a powerful process nudge is with the often-cited experience originating from recruitment in some symphony orchestras [8]. Faced with very few women in orchestras, and wondering why only white men were competent enough to be in the orchestras, a practice was introduced of auditioning behind a screen in order for the evaluation committee to only focus on listening to the music. The result was that 40-50% of the most talented musicians are now women, and the ethnic composition of the most competent also changed significantly. As a next step some of the orchestras now lay out carpets on the floor behind the screen in order for the evaluation committee members not to be able to hear the shoes on the floor. The challenge is that the brain unconsciously
detects the sex of the candidate from the sound of the shoes and is thus gender biased in
the evaluation of the musician. This concept of blind auditions to select talent has
transcended to light entertainment with “The Voice”, a reality TV talent competition show,
originally created in the Netherlands by John de Mol and now franchised in over 20
countries around the world. Since identity information disturbs the evaluation of
qualifications, companies could benefit from anonymising the candidates in the initial
screening of applications by hiding information such as picture, gender, age, and more.
This can be done by designing the electronic recruiting system to hide this information and
by requiring search companies to anonymize the list of candidates for top management
positions. This “Process Nudge” is a simple trick that does not cost much, but makes a big
difference in terms of living up to our intentions with I&D.

One more illustration of a System / Process Nudge comes from Dr. Axel Jentzsch who is
the Head of Diversity and Inclusion Europe at BASF. Many organisations have clearly
stated intentions and policies for objective talent review discussions, however often in
practice, the discussions may lack objectivity and the biased tendency to look for data and
facts confirming an impression of a person could lead to an increased sharing of rumours,
gossips, and judgements instead of real observations. Dr. Jentzsch’s organisation
developed a clever & simple nudge to help reduce this human trait. They used a bell as a
tool to make ‘an auditory attention impact’ in talent review discussions in order to increase
objectivity. During discussions, all managers were given a bell to put in front of them (a
hotel reception bell). They were instructed to make immediate use of this bell, whenever
they experienced (or suspected) that someone was sharing a rumour or gossip and not a
real personal experience, or whenever the experience was not presented as a neutral
observation but rather in a judging way. This nudge helped the managers to understand
how often and how quickly talent development discussions deviated from the objective
sharing of observations and allowed them to quickly get back "on track" with their
intentions for objectivity in the review process.

3. “Framing/Anchoring” Inclusion Nudge

The intent of this type of Inclusion Nudge is to make people (the brain) perceive an issue
differently by altering the frame or the anchor of a thought process. This is about creating a
new discourse and changing all the connotations of the words associated with inclusion,
diversity, gender, equality etc. This is about asking new kinds of questions to kick-
start a new kind of thought process that will help promote inclusiveness as ‘a need to have’ and
not ‘a nice to have’.

An example of this type of “Framing/Anchoring” Nudge is seen in use by the fairly new
approach of labelling our field as “Inclusion and Diversity” (I&D) rather than what has been
traditionally used as “Diversity and Inclusion” (D&I). This trend tends to be more centred in
Europe rather than North America and arises out of the European perspective that the
beginning point (or “Anchor”) in the work is on Inclusion first. Another “Framing/Anchoring”
Nudge is on ensuring that in data reports to show all groups, and list the majority first. For
example, on gender data reports, show both male and female data. This allows for a full
context discussion, and it can be jarring to the thought process to read that (for example)
92% of senior leaders are men, as opposed to 8% senior leaders are women. Our brains
are used to seeing women as the minority (even though they are actually the majority of
the population, consumer decision makers, university graduates, and more). It feels harder to explain a majority data result, and seeing the numbers together offers the chance to really question “Why?”, and look to where bias decisions may occur.

These three types of Inclusion Nudges (Feel the Need, Systems/Process, and Framing/Anchoring) have been successfully used by the authors, with many examples of each type.

**Case study: Impactful behavioural change at Arla Foods**

In Ms Nielsen’s role as the Global Head of Diversity, Inclusion, and Collaboration at Arla Foods, one of the largest dairy companies in the world, she is working strategically with unconscious bias and Inclusion Nudges (and so are the managers) in order to achieve an inclusive and innovative collaborative culture that contributes to the global business strategy.

The foundation of this work is a systemic and cultural transformation. One of the most important enablers Arla is the implementation of a two-day I&D development session for leadership teams. The leaders gain insight into how the unconscious mind influences their leadership, how behavioural patterns and group dynamics affect their collaboration and performance, and how they can change this to strengthen their management and business.

In this Arla Foods Leadership Development session, the first kind of Inclusion Nudges (“Feel the Need”) is used as an eye-opener on how we tend to evaluate performance, network, who we seek out for input, how we give feedback and more. In an exercise developed by Cook Ross Inc. [9], each participant evaluates one candidate and rates the candidate’s qualifications and potential for a position/promotion. Before the exercise, the leaders often express that in real life, they choose the most competent person because the evaluation is based on objective qualification criteria. The participants believe that they are each getting a different candidate to evaluate. What they don’t know is that in the exercise, all the resumes and applications of the candidate they were each given are exactly the same, with only the photograph, name, skin colour, and gender changed to be different. In debriefing the exercise, they learn that despite all having the same resumes and applications, they have each often evaluated the candidates very differently. With this eye opener, the conversation changes substantially, and leaders are now motivated to apply new practices in the existing recruitment processes to make better (more objective, rational, and reflective) decisions on who is the most competent candidate. The result of this work in Arla Foods is that leaders and managers stop hiring alone, use diverse recruiting teams, challenge bias, look for the hidden barriers etc. They have use a ‘system/process’ Inclusion Nudge to help the brain shift mode of thinking by dividing the interview into two parts, and evaluating with the candidates, before making the final evaluation and selection. The managers furthermore learn to apply the techniques in order design other similar ‘system/process’ nudges.

Another type of Inclusion Nudge used in Arla Foods is to change the frame and thus our perception of diversity (which drives our behaviour). Arla has, for example, instead of
setting targets for gender equality or percentages of minorities in the workforce, set a team composition objective that focuses on reducing the homogeneity in four demographic factors in order to achieve better performance: a maximum of 70 % of team members of the same nationality/ethnicity, gender, generation and educational/professional background. With this frame, the implicit associations is not: gender=women, but is instead: less homogenous teams=performance and innovation.

The initial results of this approach in Arla Foods are promising. The 748 leaders who have so far been 'nudged', and now 'nudge' themselves and each other, have changed behaviour in several ways. They compose working groups, project groups and teams in accordance with the team composition objective. The leaders experience more constructive group dynamics and new ways of collaborating and solving tasks. Among the results (local) are a 25 % increase in the success rate of recruitment and the annual engagement survey (global) show a 19% increase in the employees experiencing that their differences are being used more. Leaders report that they are much more conscious about challenging 'us' and 'them' groups and more actively seek out diverse perspectives.

A paradigm shift

This starts with each of us, first by recognizing that we are all biased in our thoughts and decisions, and embrace that as a natural part of being human. We should learn more about some of our own patterns, so that we can start paying attention to these, and most importantly, challenge these in our daily actions. Indeed many organisations have launched extensive unconscious bias awareness training programs. However, awareness alone will not generate the change needed for greater inclusion. The insights and learnings must be applied. This can occur on both the individual and organisational level and nudging towards inclusion is a powerful enabler.

Recommended next steps:

Know yourself:

1. You can start by testing your own implicit associations at [https://implicit.harvard.edu/](https://implicit.harvard.edu/)
2. Conduct awareness sessions on Unconscious Bias within your organisations.
3. Use an efficient brain trick to challenge your unconscious reaction by asking yourself questions such as: "If 'he' was a 'she' would I react the same way?" Or "If she was not 25 years old but had 25 years of experience more than me, would I have listened differently?".
Examine the Organisation:
Conduct an organisational scan to identify the top inclusion issues and scan for where bias may occur at key choice points.

Create Change:
Design Inclusion Nudges at these key choice points to assist in achieving the intention for greater equity, fairness, and inclusion.

References


Join the community focused on inclusion nudges
Share your Inclusion Nudges with the authors for incorporation into the next edition of the Guide on Inclusion Nudges authored by Nielsen & Kepinski, and receive more Inclusion Nudge information for further inspiration (details on the guide and contact details for the authors are below).
INCLUSION NUDGES
Practical Techniques for Behaviour, Culture, & System Change to Mitigate Unconscious Bias & Create Inclusive Organisations

Tinna C. Nielsen and Lisa Kepinski, November 2014

This is a soon-to-be released guide on Inclusion Nudges which includes selected content from D&I, HR, & business leaders, compiled and authored by two experienced D&I professionals (Tinna C. Nielsen & Lisa Kepinski). The guide’s aim is to help reduce the gap that is often felt by organisational leaders after launching unconscious bias awareness sessions and then asking “What next?”. This guide offers simple, practical techniques, which we call “Inclusion Nudges” and are designed for behavioural change to create a more inclusive environment. Inclusion Nudges are purposeful interventions at key choice points where bias may occur and are the next step for effective return on your investments in unconscious bias training.

Join us in this on-going project by offering your examples of Inclusion Nudges to reduce bias in acceptance, processes, and perception. Future updates to the Guide will be conducted and we’d value receiving your Inclusion Nudges examples for inclusion. By becoming a contributor, you will receive a complimentary copy of the guide for your own use. To submit your examples, please contact the authors (contact details below).

If you’d like a wider intervention on the topic specifically for your organisation, then please contact the authors to discuss about scheduling an Unconscious Bias & Inclusion Nudges Learning Lab.

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**Tinna C. Nielsen** is an anthropologist and behavioural economist by profession and passion. She is working with systemic, cultural, and behavioural change as Global head of Inclusion, Diversity & Collaboration in Arla, and in other organisations. She is an experienced developer, trainer, change manager, strategy designer, project manager focused on developing inclusive cultures, leadership, teams, and organisational structures. Her passion is to develop new innovative approaches to Diversity & Inclusion and innovative collaboration at the intersection between anthropology, psychology and neuroscience. Tinna is the founder of the social-economic organisation, Move The Elephant for Inclusiveness that spreads inspiration to work with Inclusion Nudges in organisations and institutions in as many domains as possible. She is a fellow at the RSA.

**Lisa Kepinski** brings over 20 years Inclusion & Diversity (I&D) experience as a global D&I executive with AXA, Microsoft, & Hewlett-Packard, and now as the Founder of the Inclusion Institute focused on D&I research, Inclusion Nudges, consultancy, training, & coaching. Her special expertise in organisational development integrated with D&I make her a unique resource for change at all levels, from the individual to the systems level. For many years, Lisa has been on the advisory boards of Catalyst Europe and W.I.N., was a founding member of a European-based Global D&I Network, & was a faculty member for The Conference Board D&I Academy. She has a Bachelor’s degree in Social Psychology and a Master’s degree in Linguistics, with a specialization on gender communications. She is based in Germany and US with a large network in most of the world.