

# ON THE SENSE AND NONSENSE OF ANTI-BIAS TRAINING PROGRAMS



Universiteit Utrecht



## 6 Scientific Insights and Practical Recommendations

### Why conduct this research?

Many organizations offer anti-bias training programs to reduce (implicit) bias\*, for example in the form of lectures, films, role plays and interactive training days. However, the effectiveness of these programs has not always been scientifically proven. In this factsheet we summarize the main scientific findings regarding anti-bias training programs. We then use these insights to formulate advice to organizations that want to implement an anti-bias training program themselves.

### What did we do?

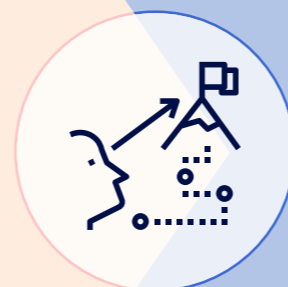
To get a good picture of the existing scientific knowledge on how anti-bias training programs work, we carried out a literature review. To do this, we collected 55 scientific articles. This collection comprises expert commentary in which scientists summarize the leading studies on anti-bias training programs. It also includes empirical studies which investigated the effectiveness of anti-bias training programs. The results and conclusions discussed below summarize the main patterns in this literature. The empirical studies comprise results from surveys conducted among more than 180,000 respondents (employees, directors, managers, trainees, and students) from 68 different countries.

## WHAT DID WE FIND?

01

### Anti-bias training programs are no silver bullet.

The actual content of the training aside, there are two key factors that determine the success of anti-bias training programs. Firstly, the way in which the training program is implemented plays an important role. For instance, the more closely the objectives of a training program are aligned with the vision of the organization, the more effective the training will be. To achieve this, it is essential to appoint someone who is responsible for the success of the training. Secondly, the link between the anti-bias training program and other measures taken is instrumental to the program's success. It has emerged that anti-bias training programs are more effective when they form part of a broader diversity policy. This means that steps are also taken to regulate the influx, promotion, and retention of minority groups.



## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN IN PRACTICE?

### Create the right context.

It is important that anti-bias training programs are implemented systematically. This means that organizations first need to define their vision on diversity and inclusion, which they can then translate into specific goals. It is also important to assess the level of support for the training program and to measure its effectiveness in both the short and long term. Furthermore, anti-bias training programs should be embedded in the organization's broader diversity policy. This means that diversity and inclusion are taken into account throughout the entire HR cycle. This helps organizations to reflect more closely on why they want to introduce anti-bias training and on the added value of such a program in the context of existing measures for diversity and inclusion.

## WHAT DID WE FIND?

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN IN PRACTICE?

02

### Training programs can be effective in the short term; the long-term impact remains unclear.

Most anti-bias training programs succeed in creating awareness about the existence and mechanisms of implicit bias (for an example training program, see<sup>1</sup>). Some anti-bias training programs stimulate participants to actively think about their bias, experiences, and behavior. In the majority of cases, these programs result in participants having a more positive attitude towards minorities in the short term. Furthermore, at the end of such a training program they often express the intention to change their behavior. However, there is too little evidence to prove that this intention actually results in a change in participants' behavior in the long term. One of the main explanations for this is that few training programs actually explain how participants can change their behavior.



### Think about how a training program will contribute to achieving diversity goals in the long term.

If an organization's goal is to create more diversity and inclusion within its own organization, implementing an anti-bias training program on its own isn't enough. For anti-bias training programs to be as successful as possible, organizations can, for example, organize follow-up sessions or hire a coach. Once the training program has come to an end, employees can then talk to this coach whenever they encounter new or difficult situations.

03

### Active training programs are more effective than passive training programs.

Organizations can implement their anti-bias training program in a variety of ways. For example, some programs are more passive (lectures and films) and others are more active (role plays and interactive training days). Passive training methods are usually only educational and only lead to greater awareness of how implicit bias works. Active methods not only raise awareness, but also have an impact on participants' emotions. For example, participants may feel guilty and uncomfortable when confronted with their own behavior, which in turn motivates them to do 'better' in the future.



### Use active methods.

Actively involving participants is a key factor for the success of a training program. The format of the training doesn't really matter as such, as long as the participants are actively involved. Then, participants are more likely to feel that they need to do something with the knowledge and insights they have gained. Therefore, it is important to hire an experienced trainer who can make sure that the training program goes well. Example: a training program in which participants learn that they may experience stressful emotions when confronted with their own bias, but in which they also learn how to deal with these feelings of frustration and insecurity<sup>2</sup>. Another example is a training program in which participants learn how to communicate effectively with employees with minority status (for an example training program, see<sup>3,4</sup>). See<sup>5</sup> for other specific examples.

04

### Training programs can also be counterproductive.

If a training program focuses on the content of stereotypes, this can lead to a reinforced perception of stereotypes among participants. Also, the idea that everyone has biases may lead to people being held less accountable for discrimination. This may weaken people's willingness to tackle discrimination. Providing an anti-bias training program can also wrongly give the impression that an organization has taken effective measures to properly address diversity and inclusion. Consequently, employees from majority groups in particular may become less sensitive to new instances of discrimination. Furthermore, they may not see the relevance of anti-bias training programs and may feel excluded. As a result, they may be less inclined to support these training programs.



### Identify potential adverse effects and monitor resistance.

Organizations can assess the level of support for and the effectiveness of anti-bias training programs themselves. This allows them to get a better idea of the circumstances within their own organization that affect the success of a program. To tackle resistance effectively, it is important to determine prior to the training whether there is any resistance, where this resistance is coming from and what this resistance actually entails. Objections raised by opponents are usually not about the actual training program itself (e.g. they might feel undervalued). These objections should be taken seriously, without affecting the training program. Actively listening to employees is essential for an effective policy.

## WHAT DID WE FIND?

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN IN PRACTICE?

05

### Training programs which focus on bias towards one specific group can send out the wrong message.

Training programs aimed at reducing bias towards one specific group (e.g. women) can send a message that bias towards other groups (e.g. ethnic minorities) is considered less important. The extent to which programs aimed at bias towards one group also reduce bias towards other groups is also open to debate. There are some indications to suggest that positive attitudes towards one minority group are generalized to other minority groups, but it is still too early to draw any significant conclusions. However, training programs that focus on bias towards one group may wrongly make (potential) participants wonder what is 'wrong' with this group, despite the fact that bias is a systematic problem.



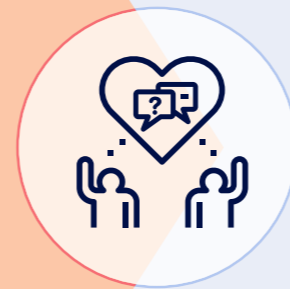
### Focus on bias against a broad group of employees.

It is important that training programs do not just focus on reducing bias towards one group. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that everyone has prejudices, regardless of their background or group. By focusing on bias against multiple groups, participants become aware of structural inequality within their organization (see<sup>2</sup> for example training programs). This way, participants are less likely to focus on what is 'wrong' with a particular group. Training programs aimed at multiple groups encourage participants to think about how organizational structures can be changed so as to limit the likelihood of bias occurring.

06

### Making training programs mandatory and the make-up of the group can produce contradictory effects.

Making anti-bias training mandatory for all employees could give rise to additional resistance and undermine participants' intrinsic motivation. On the other hand, research shows that voluntary training programs only appeal to people who are already supportive of diversity and inclusion. The make-up of the training group is also important. If organizations only send employees from the majority group to participate in a training course, they may get the impression that the organization sees them as 'the ones who need the training most'. This could be counterproductive to the success of the program. However, a very diverse group of participants can also lead to participants feeling unsafe and insecure. This prevents them from acquiring new skills.



### Don't make training compulsory; do make clear why participation is important and create a safe environment during the program.

Voluntary training programs are preferable to compulsory programs. Forcing people to take part is often counterproductive. However, it is important that organizations are aware of the limited impact of voluntary training programs. To encourage as many employees as possible to take part in the training, organizations can, for example, make it clear that their participation is important for achieving diversity and inclusion goals. It is also important that the organization has an inclusive culture. This creates a safe environment for all employees to learn and develop. It takes more than just providing one anti-bias training program to create an inclusive atmosphere; this calls for diversity measures that foster an organizational culture in which everyone belongs and can be themselves.

#### Note

\*The term 'bias' refers to the prejudices against individuals or groups with minority status, such as women, ethnic minorities, sexual minorities and people with functional disabilities. 'Implicit bias' refers to relatively unconscious and automatic associations with and reactions to minority groups. 'Explicit bias' refers to intended beliefs about groups on a more conscious level. Both types of bias lead to unequal opportunities in the workplace when it comes to the recruitment, progression and inclusion of employees with minority status compared to employees with majority status. However, since implicit bias is often subtle, people are often less aware of the major impact implicit bias can have on opportunities for employees with minority status in the workplace.

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Melissa Vink, MSc  
Wiebren Jansen, PhD  
Jojanneke van der Toorn, PhD  
Naomi Ellemers, PhD  
Beatriz Monteiro Graça Casquinho, MSc  
Bedriye Kuyumcu

For more information, see:  
[www.organisatiegedrag.nl](http://www.organisatiegedrag.nl)

Social, Health and Organizational Psychology  
Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences  
Utrecht University  
Heidelberglaan 1  
3584 CS Utrecht

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