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You've raised awareness, now what?

We often raise awareness about key issues like diversity and mental health work. But, can raising awareness really change behaviour and tackle workplace issues?

We do a lot of awareness raising at work, whether we're using an International Day of 'X' to shine a light on an organisation policy or running a week of activities to promote the importance of well-being. Beyond the workplace there are countless awareness-raising campaigns across the year in spheres like public health and sustainability.

If we want to start a discussion about societal and workplace issues, this isn't a bad thing. Why, then, have communication academics written an article entitled [Stop Raising Awareness Already?](#) The crux of the matter is that we want people to do something differently as a result of awareness raising, but that doesn't always happen. In fact, awareness raising can backfire.

Why does this happen, and what does this mean for practice?

Awareness raising doesn't always address the real issue

Mental health has risen up the organisational agenda recently, in no small part due to general awareness raising about mental health. This is positive, given that the stigma around mental ill health has silenced many.

But mental ill health remains a big issue for our workplaces. The CIPD's [Health and well-being](#) survey finds that stress is the third most common reason for short-term absence, and mental ill health is the fourth – and it is on the rise.

Awareness raising might have impacted these numbers – as mental health is more commonly discussed, employees may be more likely to disclose the true reason for their absence. This is undeniably positive as it allows managers to give their team appropriate support.

But lack of awareness is not the root cause of mental ill health at work. Heavy workloads, toxic work cultures and poor management are just some of the issues that businesses

need to tackle if they want to create a healthy work environment.

However, organisations often focus on awareness raising. Mind's [Workplace Wellbeing Index](#) found that 68% of employers run awareness-raising events on mental health. The same survey found that only 4 in 10 (42%) employees say they have time to recover after a busy period of work – suggesting that supporting employee well-being isn't always embedded into an organisation's way of doing things.

Awareness raising can backfire

Another area where awareness raising is commonplace is diversity. A common goal of diversity training – particularly around unconscious bias – is to make people aware of their bias and how this impacts decision-making. Given that bias (both unconscious and conscious) can have a huge impact on workplace inclusion, this makes intuitive sense. But does being aware of bias change behaviour?

Our recent research [Diversity Management that Works: An evidence-based view](#), finds that unconscious bias training can actually backfire if positioned in the wrong way. One way this happens is moral licensing, where people feel they've done something good, so make less effort in the future to change their behaviour.

Second, unconscious bias training often positions bias as something that is universal and by its nature, hard to control. This is accurate, but creating the sense that 'everyone is biased' doesn't provide accountability or a clear way for people to tackle their biases and change their behaviour. And, arguably, some biases aren't unconscious at all. Awareness-raising training needs to also consider the skills needed to put this awareness into practice.

What's the alternative? There's some evidence that perspective-taking approaches are the most effective forms of diversity training. This involves training beyond 'awareness' and allowing people to understand what it's like to walk in another's shoes, which can do more to change behaviour following training. In other words, empathy is more effective in galvanising action. But, as is the case with mental health, systems and practices also need to be in place to tackle diversity issues at work.

How can we make awareness-raising activities have real impact?

Awareness-raising initiatives can be powerful tools to open up conversations around a particular issue or shine a light on policies and practices. But if our goal is to change behaviour, we need to look at the wider picture – there are many reasons why we don't change our behaviour, not just lack of awareness.

In other words, awareness raising is a good start but needs to be backed up by other programmes and shifts in behaviour. Some key questions to ask of awareness-raising

initiatives are:

- What's the desired outcome of awareness raising – if it's behaviour change, how will that change be supported?
- What barriers are there to behaviour change? Time constraints, workplace practices and our own belief in our ability to change our behaviour all make a difference in behaviour change. How can this be addressed?
- What systems changes are required to support change – equipping individuals to tackle bias is a good step, but how can systems be debiased?

This critical look at the impact and outcomes of awareness-raising activities can help them have real impact and avoid them becoming a box-ticking exercise.
