

Barriers to Inclusion: Stereotype Threat

What is it?

When individuals are concerned that their performance might reinforce a negative stereotype about their identity, their performance tends to suffer. For example, women do worse on math tests when reminded of the stereotype that women are bad at math.

This is an unconscious reaction known as “stereotype threat,” a term coined in 1995 by Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson, leaders in the field of social psychology. Over the years they have conducted 300+ research experiments. Although primarily studied in academic settings, there is some research that reveals how negative stereotypes hinder workplace diversity. When an individual is in a demographic minority – that is, being the “only one” – research shows that this underrepresented status can lead to the individual experiencing stereotype threat. For example, if there is only one Latina employee in a group, she may fear reinforcing negative stereotypes, representing her entire culture, and being judged or perceived on the basis of her ethnicity rather than her actual performance. The long-term impact and exposure to stereotype threat in the workplace and how people respond are still being examined.

Although people experiencing it may not realize that how they are feeling is as a result of stereotype threat, the following have been associated with the reaction and thus can have an impact on work performance:

- anxiety
- distraction
- loss of motivation
- lowered expectations
- reduced self-control
- reduced memory
- reduced creativity, flexibility, and speed
- increased pressure

Stereotype threat can affect people of any race, religion, orientation, etc., because all of us, regardless of who we are, at some point can be perceived by others with at least one negative stereotype.

What can I do?

For myself...

- Educate yourself about stereotype threat, and spend some time reflecting on the concept.
- Discuss with trusted peers.
- Look for positive role models within your stereotyped group.

As a manager...

- Make it clear that you think of your staff as complex people with many different attributes and qualities.
- Recognize your staff for who they are as members of the team, and the work that they are doing.
- When you refer to your expectations, explicitly state that you believe your staff is capable of meeting your high standards.

Where can I learn more?

- American Psychological Association “Stereotype Threat Widens Achievement Gap”
<http://www.apa.org/research/action/stereotype.aspx>
- Block, Caryn; Koch, Sandy, Liberman, Benjamin; Merriweather, Tarani J; Roberson, Loriann Contending With Stereotype Threat at Work: A Model of Long-Term Responses
<https://www.apa.org/education/ce/stereotype-threat.pdf>
- Roberson, Deitch, Brief, & Block, 2003
http://www.reducingstereotypethreat.org/bibliography_roberson_deitch_brief_block.html
- Stroessner, Good and Webster “ReducingStereotypeThreat.org” <http://reducingstereotypethreat.org>
- Steele, Claude *Whistling Vivaldi* W.W. Norton & Company, 2010
- Steele, C. M., & Aronson, J. (1995) Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African-Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69, 797-811