

ADVERTISEMENT



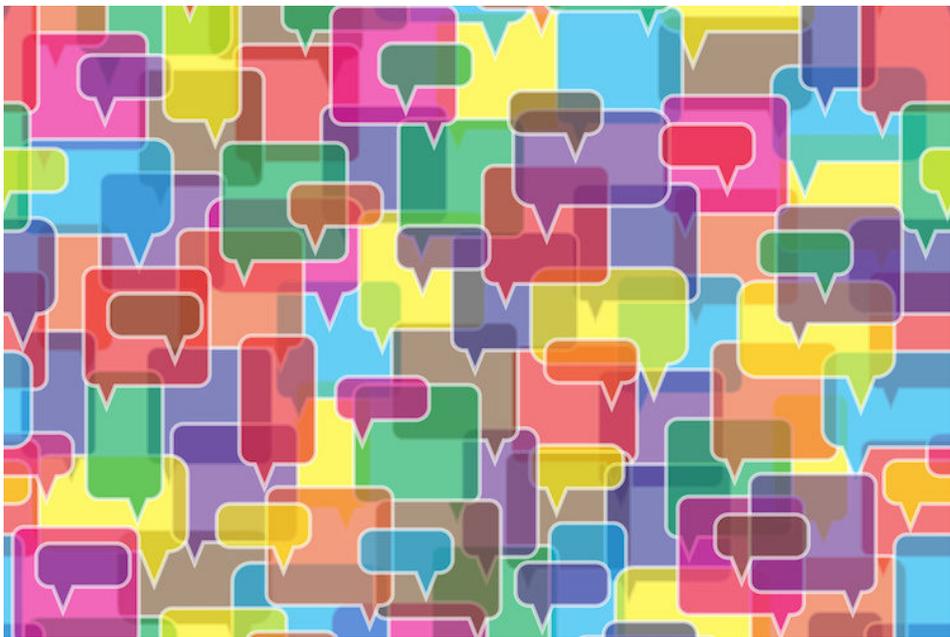
PROFILES & CASE STUDIES

# A diversity training success story

Here’s how marketing services firm Ansira was able to help managers recognize their own biases and change their behavior for the better.

*Sarah Fister Gale*

December 4, 2020



Like many organizations in 2020, Ansira’s leaders have been trying to improve their approach to diversity, equity and inclusion.

Public conversations about systemic racism, the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police and the Black Lives Matter protests that took place across the globe spurred executives at the 100-year-old marketing services firm to take a hard look at how they were addressing DEI – and what more they could be doing.

“George Floyd’s death in May, and the social unrest that followed, left us wondering ‘what is the appropriate response?’” says Robb Farrell, AVP of learning and development for Ansira in Dallas.

Leaders across the company agreed that they needed to address the micro-inequities and unconscious bias that might be permeating the Ansira culture – and they all made public commitments to doing better. “It has been one of my proudest moments at Ansira,” Farrell says.

### Lunch is not enough

At the time, the company had no formal diversity training in place. However, Farrell had overseen a diversity training program in his previous role at computer security company McAfee. “It had a tremendous impact on the organization,” he says. “People there are still talking about it.”

## Popular Articles

- 1 [What is leadership, and who is a leader?](#)
- 2 [LinkedIn Becomes a Serious Open Learning Platform](#)
- 3 [What Are Learning Organizations, and What Do They Really Do?](#)
- 4 [Reimagining workplace learning during COVID-19](#)
- 5 [Leading Across the Generations](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

**NOW AVAILABLE!**

**CHIEF LEARNING OFFICER®**

**Fall Symposium Video Library**

Watch or rewatch your favorite sessions at your convenience.

[chieflearningofficer.com/videos/#symposium](http://chieflearningofficer.com/videos/#symposium)

## Sign Up

WE’LL DELIVER OUR CONTENT RIGHT TO YOUR INBOX OR OFFICE FOR FREE

**Sign Up**

Unlike many diversity training programs that focus on actions leaders can take to engage employees of historically marginalized or underrepresented groups: -- take them to lunch! Invite them to speak in meetings! -- this program focuses on self-awareness and the differences between intent and outcome. "Even if you don't intend to be biased, if someone has a different perspective on your actions, you need to pay attention to that," Farrell says.

Farrell reached out to Steve Young, senior partner at Insight Education Systems, a management consulting firm based in New Jersey that provides leadership, diversity and inclusion consulting services, to create Ansira's new program. They launched the first of three sessions for 250 Ansira leaders and managers in August.

The course, called MicroInequities: Managing Unconscious Bias, establishes the link between diversity and its influence on leadership effectiveness. The course helps leaders understand how the messages they send are interpreted, and how that drives (or disables) commitment, loyalty and business performance.

Helping managers link diversity to business performance is critical to the success of diversity training -- and why these programs so often go wrong, Young says. He notes that many white male leaders still think of DEI as "charitable work" that is all about helping women and people of color to advance -- even if they aren't the best people for the job.

"If you want DEI efforts to work, you have to get out of the realm of 'doing good deeds' and focus on making it an impetus for the business," Young says.

Fortunately, the data to support that argument is irrefutable. Studies consistently show that diverse companies are more profitable, demonstrate greater creativity, and have more effective governance and better problem-solving abilities.

#### I'd like you to meet Jane

The business case for diversity is clear, but getting leaders to change their core behavior continues to be challenging, in part because most biases are unconscious. If a leader isn't aware of their biased behavior, they have no incentive to change.

Young addresses this obstacle by helping learners to recognize how subtle, often unwittingly delivered messages set the tone for exclusion and the perception of an employee's value and performance. The messages are overt, but the meaning is often clear, he says: "The root of good leadership is how you send messages."

He points to one exercise, in which a leader introduces two team members to a group of clients. The leader describes one using positive terms about their performance and the other using tactical terms describing what they do -- i.e., "Bob is an amazing problem-solver who can get any job done" and "Jane is our marketing lead who will walk you through the project plan." While both descriptions are accurate and neither is negative, the second sends the message that the speaker doesn't value Jane as much as they value Bob.

That exercise had a big impact on Kimberly Henderson, assistant vice president in the strategy department at Ansira. "It made me think about how I use speech and tone when I communicate," she says. She admits that she is often in situations where she is introducing her team to clients, and she may speed through the last few introductions to get things moving, but she now wonders what impact that might have on her people. "It made me aware that even if my intent is to hurry things along, it might still have a negative impact," she says.

It also caused Henderson to think about how she engages with one of her team who has cerebral palsy. "I never caught myself treating him differently, but the training makes me pay more attention to my words."

#### I can't help but notice ...

That is the kind of impact Young is aiming for in his program, which is interactive and story-driven. "It's more of a conversation than a lecture," he says.

In the training, he doesn't dictate what learners should do or say. Rather, he focuses on a more "Socratic" approach. "You never want to accuse," he says. "You have to let people do their own self-analysis."



"There is less bickering about what happened, and more focus on understanding why something is happening and how to fix it." -- Kimberly Henderson, assistant vice president of strategy, Ansira

ADVERTISEMENT

NOW AVAILABLE!

CHIEF LEARNING OFFICER®

Fall Symposium  
Video Library

Watch or rewatch your favorite  
sessions at your convenience.

chieflearningofficer.com/videos/#symposium

## Upcoming Events

[How to Create a Resilient Culture of Growth Through Micro-Credentialing](#)

[Diversity in the Workplace: How to Build a Culture of Inclusion to Advance Progress](#)

[Building a Resilient Workforce: How to Improve the Employee Experience in a Time of Disruption](#)

[Analyzing the Right Data to Build Diversity and Belonging](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

ADVERTISEMENT

One way he achieves that is by encouraging leaders to use the phrase “I can’t help but notice ...” when talking to peers about biased behavior. He shares the example of working with a female CEO who, while attending a CEO conference, was asked who her husband was — instead of what company she led.



“Our hope is that we can recognize how big an issue this is and take a solutions-oriented approach to change.”  
— Robb Farrell, AVP of learning and development, Ansira

At first she wanted to accuse him of bias, Young says. But that would only put him on the defensive. Instead, she said, “I can’t help but notice you assumed I’m a spouse and not a CEO. Why did you make that assumption?”

“It forced him to do his own self-analysis,” Young says. It caused the man to explore his own biases in a way that an attack on his character wouldn’t have.

The course explores many other common unconscious behaviors, actions and assumptions that get in the way of creating a truly diverse environment.

Farrell points to a powerful example is the course about empathy, and how empathizing with people who experience prejudice is not a requirement — or even very helpful for creating change. “Empathy can actually be a barrier,” he says. If someone feels empathy for the obstacles women and people of color

face in the workplace, they may think that is enough, but it doesn’t change anything. “We need to use data to find inequities, then look for solutions.”

### Training is the first step

Early feedback on the training at Ansira has been overwhelmingly positive, with leaders admitting that they recognize biases in their own behavior and reporting they are applying the tools they have learned on the job every day.

Henderson says she has adapted her own behavior and reports seeing changes in many of her peers. She is hearing more inclusive language from senior leaders and notes that her department head has created a safe space to have conversations about racial inequity in the workplace and how the company can close that gap. It has also changed the tone of conversations related to diversity and equality, she says. “There is less bickering about what happened, and more focus on understanding why something is happening and how to fix it.”

Farrell has seen similar changes, including one leader who came to him for help after recognizing bias in the make-up of his own team. “It is starting conversations we weren’t having before,” he says.

He has also received a flood of volunteers from leaders who want to take a more active role in ongoing DEI efforts. “Training was just the start,” he says. “We want DEI to be part of our DNA.”

Farrell’s team is now deploying additional DEI virtual learning courses, which are accessible to 1,200 employees across the company. They are also conducting diversity assessments, establishing employee resource groups and setting KPIs to measure progress and identify problems in the way the company hires, promotes and supports all of its employees.

“Our leaders want to handle this issue responsibly,” Farrell says. “Our hope with the training is that we can recognize how big an issue this is and take a solutions-oriented approach to change.”



Sarah Fister Gale is a writer based in Chicago. To comment, email [editor@clomedia.com](mailto:editor@clomedia.com).

ADVERTISEMENT

## Next Up

[5 Forces Shaping the Future of HR](#)

[Why ‘Leaders Eat Last’](#)

[5 keys to ethical leadership](#)

[3 reasons external benchmarking is bad for corporate learning](#)

[Getting creative with learning ROI measurement](#)

Even Santa and the elves have been working virtually.

Unleash the power of peer coaching

☰ Menu

SPONSORED CONTENT

## Fall 2020 CLO Symposium Video Library Now Available by Chief Learning Officer

### Topics

[Diversity, Equity & Inclusion](#)  
[Leadership Development](#)  
[Learning Delivery](#)  
[Measurement](#)  
[Strategy](#)  
[Talent Management](#)  
[Technology](#)  
[Your Career](#)  
[Commentary & Opinion](#)  
[Profiles & Case Studies](#)

### Resources

[CLO Accelerator](#)  
[Email Sign Up](#)  
[Awards](#)  
[Contribute](#)  
[Research](#)  
[Whitepapers](#)

### Events

[Upcoming Events](#)  
[CLO Symposium](#)  
[CLO Breakfast Club](#)  
[Webinars](#)  
[Speakers Bureau](#)

### Follow Us

[in LinkedIn](#)  
[Twitter](#)  
[f Facebook](#)  
[YouTube](#)  
[RSS](#)

### Advertise

[Media Kit](#)  
[Editorial Calendar](#)  
[Contact the Sales Team](#)

### About Us

[Our Company](#)  
[Our Team](#)  
[Press](#)  
[Contact Us](#)  
[Privacy Policy](#)  
[Terms Of Use](#)