

THE BLOG

The Face Of Agriculture Is Predominantly Male -- This Needs To Change

We need to work towards greater diversity in agriculture and on raising the awareness and changing the attitudes of our male colleagues.

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Unconscious bias is not a concept that is often discussed, and yet it influences the manner in which all of us act towards people we come into contact with.

The human brain is geared towards taking mental shortcuts to process information subconsciously and speedily. This is not a bug but a feature; it allows us to navigate interactions with other people, to make snap decisions, and to react speedily when in danger.

To do this, the brain reviews all the information at its disposal and filters it to determine what is relevant to the particular situation — all of this in a split second.

The filters that the brain uses can, however, be biased, giving more weight to certain information, both in terms of information about the situation that it is being confronted with, and in terms of stored information that it's referencing.

Self-management:

Becoming aware of these unconscious biases and holding them up to the light for inspection is the first step to ensuring that we do not make assumptions and judgements based on personal characteristics that are irrelevant, such as race, gender, sexual orientation. This is on the basis of addressing underlying and unconscious, unfair discrimination.

Do we have an unconscious bias in the agricultural workplace? Well, of course: as long as it is inhabited by people we will have unconscious bias. Can we say one group is more guilty than others of allowing their unconscious biases to lead to unfair discrimination and ill-treatment?

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I don't believe we can say that, but what we can say is that agriculture is dominated by men, mostly white, and mostly middle-aged.

Although it may be unsettling and challenging, learning how to see unconscious bias for what it is — firstly in ourselves and secondly in others — and how to deal with it, is a project that promises to bear fruit and ease working relationships.

While we work towards greater diversity in the workplace — and on raising the awareness and changing the attitudes of our male colleagues — as women in this sector we also need to learn how to hold our own and how to get the work done in spite of what sometimes feels like constant background noise.

Calling a spade:

Unconscious bias was the very relevant topic of discussion at the recent Produce Marketing Association [PMA] Fresh Women's Perspectives event. Dr Tyi McCray, a US-based diversity and inclusion consultant, was the speaker of the day.

The audience, made up of women from the fresh produce sector, was invited to view unconscious bias in context, explore its effects in the workplace, and discuss mitigation in order to promote diversity and inclusion.

The PMA is a global trade organization that represents companies from every segment of the global fresh produce and floral supply chain. They foster growth amongst members by providing connections that expand business opportunities and increase sales and consumption. Their Center for Growing Talent works to attract, develop and retain talent for the global produce and floral industry.

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Agriculture needs young minds:

Finding and growing new talent features dominantly on the radar of the local citrus industry, which relies on the Citrus Academy to identify suited young people. This is no mean feat, with our young people swayed by some of the myths surrounding agriculture — and, therefore the citrus industry: a perceived scarcity of engaging career prospects, as well as the notion that the sector is only suited to the older generation.

The available fields of study in citrus production and research are production management, plant sciences, agricultural economics, and systems engineering.

Of course, the PMA event was a perfect opportunity for some of the Academy students to network with female heavyweights within the industry. Being new to the industry, these opportunities are invaluable to their development and, ultimately, their future careers.

With the average age of a South African farmer being 62, we need more young minds to enter the industry. Our young people need to be educated on the plethora of available opportunities.

Diversity is the lifeblood and energy of any workplace and is essential to the growth and sustainability of agriculture. While we will continue to encourage the leaders in agriculture to assess their unconscious biases for their relevance and fairness, we will also continue to work on paving the way for more diverse talent into the sector that we love.