

In Antibias Training, Starbucks Enlists Hip-Hop Artist Common, Chairman Howard Schultz; Employees will be asked to share stories of bias; experts say such training is hard to do, measure

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FULL TEXT

Starbucks Corp. is hoping that coming antibias training will help prevent fraught encounters like the one that led to the arrest of two black men at one of its cafes last month.

How effective it will be is an open question. Although such training has been used by companies for about two decades, its benefits are largely unproven and experts say it needs to be baked into an organization for the long term to really work.

"Expectations have to be managed," said Sherrilyn Ifill, president and director-counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, who is advising Starbucks pro bono on its antibias efforts. She told reporters Thursday that it is an "ambitious project."

Starbucks is planning to close all of its more than 8,000 company-operated stores in the U.S. on the afternoon of May 29 to conduct the training. Starbucks employees will gather at the stores where they work to watch videos featuring Starbucks Chairman Howard Schultz, board member Mellody Hobson and the hip-hop artist Common, among others, discussing what bias means and how to treat others respectfully, according to a video preview Starbucks posted online this week. They also will do exercises in which they are asked to share stories of how they have experienced bias in their own lives.

Part of the training is aimed at ensuring that the "third place" Starbucks says it provides between home and work is inclusive, executives say. "May 29 isn't a solution, it's a first step," said Rossann Williams, Starbucks executive vice president for U.S. retail, in a letter to employees that the company cited online Wednesday.

Starbucks didn't disclose how much the continuing training will cost but a spokeswoman said, "we believe this is a critical investment in the long-term success of Starbucks" and that the company will continue to invest in this area.

The company faced backlash in the past week over a new policy that says everyone, including nonpaying guests, is welcome to use its cafes, including the bathrooms. Many customers have complained on social media that they may not find room to sit and that the bathrooms might become unsafe or dirty . Some are threatening to take their business elsewhere. Some customers, though, have lauded Starbucks for the effort.

Starbucks decided to offer the training after a store manager in Philadelphia in April called the police when two black men who hadn't purchased anything and were allegedly denied bathroom access didn't leave the store when asked. That store's policy required guests to make a purchase to be in the store and use the bathroom, but Starbucks executives said the police never should have been called.

Mr. Schultz told "CBS This Morning" last month that he met with the store manager and believed she demonstrated unconscious bias when deciding to call the police. The company hasn't named the manager but said she has left the company. Starbucks executives apologized to the two men and settled with them for an undisclosed amount.

The potential for treating customers differently based on race is present in all industries, experts say.

A recent study by two university researchers found evidence of bias among hotel employees. Alexandra Feldberg, a doctoral candidate in organizational behavior at Harvard Business School, and Tami Kim, an assistant professor of marketing at the University of Virginia Darden School of Business, in 2016 sent emails to more than 7,000 U.S. hotels posing as people with Caucasian, African-American and Asian sounding names, seeking restaurant suggestions. The emails that came from Caucasian-sounding names received the highest response rate as well as the friendliest and most thorough responses, their research found. The findings haven't yet been accepted by a peer-reviewed journal.

"The results tell us that bias is not specific to companies--that it happens at all companies that interface with customers," Ms. Kim said. "If there's no big event like what happened at Starbucks, companies may not realize it's happening within their own company."

Getting people to analyze their own judgment while dealing with customers could be challenging, according to David Rock, director of the NeuroLeadership Institute, a research firm that applies neuroscience to the workplace. Workers can notice others' bias in real time, he said, and even pinpoint their bias in hindsight, but rarely can recognize their own bias as it is happening.

Jamie Lyn Perry, a professor of human resource management at Cornell University's SC Johnson College of Business, has found that the effects of one-day training "decay over time," with participants' attitudes toward diversity deteriorating six or 12 months after a training session.

Ms. Perry said 360-degree evaluations--where employees critique each other as well as their supervisors--can help monitor behavior, and companies should tie economic incentives, such as raises, to the inclusive behavior they want to promote.

Some studies have shown that antibias training can have a measurable change. For example, a University of California, Berkeley psychologist trained a group of middle-school teachers to change their disciplinary approach from treating misbehaving students simply as troublemakers, to trying to understand why they might be misbehaving. In the year after the training was conducted, the students whose teachers had undergone the training had half the suspension rate as students whose teachers had not.

Other studies have shown greater diversity in hiring at companies whose managers have undergone such training.

But there hasn't been a long-term, longitudinal study conducted on such training within a large organization, according to L. Song Richardson, dean of the University of California Irvine School of Law. She said it is extremely

difficult to eliminate the implicit biases people have but that it is possible to build awareness of them.

"The more challenging question is what institutional changes [Starbucks executives] will commit to making in order to reduce instances of biased behaviors. What safeguards will they put in place? What policies will they institute?" Ms. Richardson said.

Ms. Ifill, of the NAACP, and Heather McGhee, president of left-leaning think tank Demos and an unpaid adviser to Starbucks, said they will be releasing a report next month detailing steps Starbucks can take to weave antibias efforts into all parts of the company.

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Credit: By Rachel Feintzeig and Julie Jargon

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