

Do you support the display of thin red line flags at fire departments?

Topics > Fire Chief

**Linda Willing**

Leading the Team

Start the conversation: Address unconscious bias in the fire service

As Starbucks addresses racial bias within its organization, fire departments can take a cue from their initiative

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Starbucks recently closed more than 8,000 stores across the country on May 29 for the purpose of training all employees on the topic of unconscious bias. This move follows the arrest of two African-American men who were waiting for a friend in a Philadelphia Starbucks in April.

This organization-wide training brings up a natural question that applies to any initiative of this type: What real benefit can come from a four-hour class on such a complex topic?

BEGINNING THE CONVERSATION IS THE FIRST STEP TO COMBATING UNCONSCIOUS BIAS



Many fire departments struggle with the same issues Starbucks has confronted. (Photo/Ohio National Guard)

As someone who has developed and delivered similar training programs over decades, I acknowledge that, in the moment, maybe not much. Four hours is a very short space of time. If people want to grit their teeth and resist every word that is said, they can do it. The notion that a four-hour class **will solve problems** that have taken generations to develop is completely unrealistic.

However, as cynical as some might be about the effort, I support Starbucks in taking the steps they have and feel a sense of optimism that this training initiative will make a difference.

Why? Because with this large gesture, Starbucks has started the conversation.

They have also committed a large amount of resources to the effort. As one employee observed, "If you think about 8,000 stores closing down for a day, that's a lot of money. They are willing to put money on the line to make sure things like this don't happen." By some estimates, Starbucks invested over \$15 million in this one training initiative.

Providing formalized training in this way is also the first step toward a more consistent approach to matters that involve personal judgment. Another worker stated, "It's important that Starbucks, or any company for that matter, present the same values across all their establishments; in this case, that everyone matters and will be treated fairly and the same."

In four hours, you can start a conversation about a tough topic and model respectful ways of having that conversation. You can challenge people's preconceptions with activities that require them to make judgments and decisions. You can **provide a safe forum** that allows people to understand that others may feel very differently about something than they do.

And, as an organization, you can provide a consistent leadership vision and mandate that involves clear expectations of **what kinds of behavior are encouraged** and what will not be tolerated.

UNCONSCIOUS BIAS TRAINING SHOULD EVOLVE AS THE ORGANIZATION DOES

Four hours may not be long enough to create a new skill set. If you want people to improve their abilities to resolve conflict, communicate more effectively, or work better in teams, then further training and

development efforts will be needed.

But, that’s the whole point. This type of training should always be the beginning, not the end. Rather than “checking the box” and being done with it, such training should open the door to new ideas, unresolved issues and difficult challenges.

Most importantly, perhaps, is that this type of training, when done well, can create a new sense of personal responsibility and empowerment among members of an organization. At best, such training will reinforce the idea that not only are people able to speak up about issues on the job, but they are expected to do so.

“I think we need to hold each other accountable,” one Starbuck worker said. “We need to stop giving our friends, our coworkers, our family members and our neighbors passes on racism, classism – on any of it. And stop pretending you don't see it. We can't always see our own flaws, but if we can help each other, maybe we could.”

Many fire departments struggle with the same issues Starbucks has confronted. At best, this effort will encourage all organizations to not only start the conversation with such training, but to keep the conversation and commitment going through action and accountability every day.

About the author

Linda Willing is a retired career fire officer and currently works with emergency services agencies and other organizations on issues of leadership development, decision-making, and diversity management through her company, [RealWorld Training and Consulting](#). She is also an adjunct instructor and curriculum advisor with the National Fire Academy. Willing is the author of [On the Line: Women Firefighters Tell Their Stories](#). Willing has a bachelor’s degree in American studies, a master’s degree in organization development and is a certified mediator. She is a member of the [FireRescue1/Fire Chief Editorial Advisory Board](#). Connect with Willing via [email](#).

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