

## Report on Research Compliance Volume 19, Number 5. April 21, 2022 Break Down Norms to Foster Culture of Inclusion, Innovation

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By Jane Anderson

Identifying and implementing strategies to break down cultural norms in academic and institutional research settings can be difficult, but it's necessary to build an inclusive culture that fosters innovation, experts explained.

"Building a culture of innovation means that we have to change how people think," said Theresa Caban, director of clinical trials and industry contacts at Lundquist Institute for Biomedical Innovation in Torrance, California, at a webinar presented by the National Council of University Research Administrators.<sup>[1]</sup>

People in an organization tend to think in terms of "this is how we've always done it," or "this is how others in the community are doing it, so we're just going to do it that way," Caban said. "We like it very much when people are like us. We're attracted to others who have similar ideals [and] similar behaviors." Those challenging norms can find themselves in "a very, very lonely place," she said.

Researchers studying the effectiveness of implicit bias training have found that emphasizing the idea that everyone is biased can normalize and increase bias, Caban explained. However, they found that including a message that people are committed to overcoming their biases potentially can counter this, she added.

"From the Neanderthals to modern man, we have changed our behaviors for the good," she said. "Why would we stop doing that now?"

Individuals and institutions "need to use the tools we have in our hands to help us make those changes," Caban said. "When confronted with a cultural norm that is not or no longer acceptable, start the change by example. Create nonviolent ways to discuss and debate the behaviors in ways that are direct but kind and inclusive. It's about creating momentum to move forward together. Fear blocks change. We fear what we don't know or understand. This is why having different perspectives at the table is so important."

### **Norms Fall in Four Groups**

Caban described four different types of norms, including:

- Folkways or customs, which are socially approved standard behaviors.
- Mores, which are behaviors that are considered morally correct and ethical.
- Taboos, which are behaviors not to do.
- Laws, which are constructs that help mitigate and manage mores and taboos.

"Cultural norms are highly influential over individual behavior in a broad array of contexts," Caban said. For example, multiple norms have transitioned during the COVID-19 pandemic, and individuals have altered their behavior to adjust to those circumstances. Governments, the educational system, family and the media all communicate and influence norms, Caban said, and "the construct of a norm is very embedded in the very

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essence of who we are as individuals.”

According to Caban, strategies for reimagining norms include:

- Setting the tone by exhibiting the behavior to emulate.
- Introducing small changes that inspire and create passion.
- Forming a group to create and manage the change.

Behavior is probably the hardest thing to change, Caban said. Individuals and groups first must understand organizational norms and that change takes time. Each organization’s environment is made up of micro-environments, she said, and norms persist because people want to belong and feel part of the organization.

“Find the gap between what people are actually doing and the behavior you would like them to engage in,” she said. “Use the right people to convey this messaging—those who are influencers and well-liked by others, or those who set the rules. Frame and communicate the ‘new norm’ correctly—i.e., this is what others like you are currently doing.” Most importantly, she added, “prioritize the well-being, self-determination and power of individuals.”

Consider bringing in new people to help change norms, “instead of inviting those same five people to be on your committee,” Caban said. “Reach past them. Get new blood. Look at new perspectives. Get people that you wouldn’t imagine have something to say. I guarantee you, they will change your perspective on everything.”

People within organizations “need to practice and reflect empathy,” she said. “We have to care. And when you do those things, when you break down a silo that’s existed in your division forever, you’ve allowed space for new people to come in, for new ideas to expand and grow. And that’s change—it’s that simple.”

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