**The hidden danger of unconscious bias***A recap of Dot Proux’s Empowerment Series presentation*

It’s likely — if not certain — that each one of us has experienced some level of unconscious bias, that is, assumptions or conclusions that we make in how we perceive other people based on our own experiences…whether we’ve been the one who’s doing the judging or the one who’s being judged. Chances are we’ve all been on both sides of the spectrum.

But it’s not (entirely) our fault.

**Dot Proux**, a Chicago-based partner in Ernst & Young’s (EY) Tax Practice, explained this concept at a recent Women of DTE Empowerment Series presentation called “The Winds of Changing are Blowing — Are You Able to Stay Standing? The Hidden Danger of Unconscious Bias.” Proux has also led or actively participated in the development of EY’s talent management strategy, including efforts to align culture and leadership skills building with dramatic changes in U.S. and global workforce demographics.

If you were in attendance, you probably enjoyed Proux’s real-life examples that she’s experienced with unconscious bias, as well as her engaging nature and sense of humor on this very real, and often, sticky subject.

These assumptions stem from cultural attitudes or stereotypes around race, age, gender, religion and more. Proux explained, and research shows, that our brains jump to assumptions without us even realizing it. Research also shows that, interestingly, men and women share many of the same assumptions about gender.

An example of unconscious bias relating to gender was shared at the beginning of the presentation. A study was conducted on the magnitude of hurricanes, the number of serious injuries and deaths caused by the hurricane, and the male or female names of hurricanes that are established years before hurricanes actually arrive. The study uncovered that people may assume that the hurricanes name after women are gentler and less violent — as in, “Don’t worry about Hurricane Cindy, it’s just a girl!” Yet, this unconscious bias may be playing out in the level of risk people take since this research showed there has been a statistically greater number of deaths from hurricanes of the same magnitude with female names.

Hurricane names aside, though, unconscious bias is ever-present in our world — and in the workplace. Proux said our own unconscious bias is formed at a very early age…before our brains even have the capacity to analyze what we are thinking. So we needn’t beat ourselves up over these biases. That is, if we are working to recognize them and counter them.

Proux explained a plethora of global shifts being seen in the workplace, and how now, more than ever, it’s vital to address unconscious bias in order to grow with these changes.

“Women and younger professionals are putting pressure on the traditional ways of seeing careers and the workforce. Generation Y, for example, doesn’t want work to be their whole life,” she said, citing a story of a young staff member who had just been hired by her company in Chicago. When his workload quickly dried up, the company offered him a transfer to a different state, which he declined. Taken aback, Proux — a baby boomer and self-proclaimed workaholic — explained to the man that he either had to take the transfer or risk being laid off. To her dismay, the employee said he’d rather take the layoff. When she asked him why, he explained that he had just moved to the city and did not wish to quit a basketball league he had recently joined, as he didn’t want to leave his new friends.

Proux explained her own unconscious bias in this situation. She couldn’t fathom his decision to sacrifice his job for a sports league. But she quickly realized that the younger generation values their personal lives equal to — or more — than their work lives.

“We are predisposed to thinking that *our* experience is *everyone’s* experience,” she said.

**Diane Antishin**, executive director – HR operations, said this topic is a necessary one to address, especially since by the year 2020, half of the U.S. workforce will be from the millennial generation and younger, by 2050, there will no longer be a majority racial ethnic group in the U.S., and today, women are 33 percent more likely to graduate from college than men.

“Given these changes and many others that will impact the U.S. workforce, we need to embrace the diversity of our workforce — the differences in our life experiences, cultures, personal interests and ways of thinking, and build a culture of inclusion. This will support our ability to attract and retain the best and brightest talent and to create a workplace of high employee engagement and collaboration.

**“**Dot is an amazing presenter and facilitator,” remarked Antishin. “She really helps her audience to experience their own ‘aha moments’ from the presentation discussion.”

As Dot concerted, the issue is not so much that we all are guilty of unconscious bias, but rather, the problem lies in when we don’t recognize and “check” ourselves on our own biases. We are all biased. Working on being aware of our own biases, however, helps us lessen them not only at work, but in all areas of our lives.

So let’s all keep a look out for our own unconscious bias “aha moments.” Because recognizing them is the first step in rectifying them.