On April 12, 2018, two African American entrepreneurs had scheduled a business meeting at a Starbucks in Philadelphia’s Rittenhouse Square neighborhood. They sat without ordering, waiting for a local businessman to show up for the meeting. The store manager called 911 on them, despite the fact that they were behaving neither violently nor disruptively. When the police arrived soon after the call, they arrested the young men. The incident was viewed by the Starbucks’ leadership team, including the CEO, as “a disheartening situation” and, in the words of John Kelly, the company’s Senior VP of Public Affairs and Social Impact, “a profound failure to live up to our ideals and a violation of our values.” Starbucks, which employed around 175,000 individuals nationwide and served more than 4 million customers daily in its approximately 8,000 U.S. stores, strived to abide by its mission statement: “To inspire and nurture the human spirit, one cup, one person, one neighborhood at a time.”

The case describes how the company and its leadership responded to the crisis. To react to the incident, the leadership decided to close down its stores for a day of unconscious bias training, aimed at raising awareness of racial bias and discrimination in particular. The company also started a journey of providing more training and development for the partners, to assure that they lived by the company values on a daily basis, and revised store policy that, the leadership believed, contributed to how the store managers and employees in the Rittenhouse Square store behaved back in April 2018. As the case closes, CEO Kevin Johnson reflects on how he could assure that every Starbucks employee not only understood the company mission and values, but truly connected to them emotionally and carry them out daily in their work.

1. How would you react as a leader if you were actually to see something like this happen in your own organization?

2. What is the right thing to do?

3. How do we prepare for this?

4. How pervasive is unconscious bias in your organization? How are you measuring?

5. As a leader, manager, what role do you play in trying to understand unconscious bias better and give people opportunity to have conversations?

6. How do we measure our success?

7. Is training the answer?

8. When there is behavior that needs to be addressed, where can you turn first?