

What You Should Know About Unconscious Bias

Tip Sheet

Areas of the Brain

If you've been involved in one of our Unconscious Bias workshops this page summarizes some of the key points. It also signposts you to other content if you are interested to find out more on the subject.

The Brain

The human brain is a formidable pattern-matching machine. Sifting visual, verbal, and behavioral cues, helps us, for example, to quickly determine whether someone is friendly or hostile. Much of what it does, it does outside of our awareness. Our 'unconscious mind' processes 200,000 times more information than our conscious frontal lobes.

Types of Bias

Our biases take many forms:

- **Halo and Horns** – Shorthand for positive or negative first impressions. Halo around the head, the person can't do anything wrong, with horns, they can't do anything right.
- **Affinity Bias** – Favoring people who share the same social background, who look and sound like 'one of us.' We ignore the faults of people we like and notice the faults of those we don't.
- **Confirmation Bias** – Noticing or looking only for evidence that confirms our ideas, good or bad, and ultimately reinforces our original viewpoint.
- **Social Comparison Bias** – Having feelings of dislike and competitiveness with someone, or groups of people, which are seen as physically, or mentally, better than you.
- **Stereotype Threat** – Fearing being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype and doing something that would confirm it.
- **Gender bias** – Including being viewed as less competent, overprotection, and asserting dominance over others.
- **Ego depletion** – The idea that self-control or willpower is exhaustible. The emotional, cognitive, and physical effort draws on mental energy. When mental energy is low, self-control is typically impaired.

What is Implicit Racial Bias

It is important to distinguish implicit racial bias from racism or discrimination. Implicit biases are associations made by individuals in the unconscious state of mind. This means that the individual is likely not aware of the biased association. Implicit racial bias can cause individuals to unknowingly act in discriminatory ways. This does not mean that the individual is overtly racist, but rather that their perceptions have been shaped by experiences and these perceptions potentially result in biased thoughts or actions. No one is immune from having unconscious thoughts and associations but becoming aware of implicit racial bias creates an avenue for addressing the issue.

Unconscious Bias

Unconscious bias is a result of our limited cognitive capacity. The brain's automatic, unconscious sifting and sorting of visual, verbal, and behavioral cues to determine whether people are friendly or not means that we all develop unintentional people preferences.

Over time, our brains associate things. They form neural pathways, which become stronger every time these associations are recognized and unconsciously affirmed. So, we see white, male engineers, our brains learn that engineers are white and male. It's actually 'pleasing' to the brain when this association is affirmed. Come across an Asian, female engineer, something that challenges our unconscious association, and it's unsettling. It doesn't fit. As a result, we are more likely to, unconsciously, bias against it.

Where do all our unconscious associations and unintentional people preferences come from? They are formed by our socialization and experiences, including:

- Media exposure
- Family
- School
- Friends
- Experiences
- Work culture

In light of all of this, and because of the way it works, our brains take shortcuts.

Triggers

There can be many triggers for our unconscious biases. Watch out for:

- Ambiguous evidence
- Emotional overload; stress, anger, frustration
- Cognitive overload; complex decision
- Fear of threat
- Emotional and cognitive resources are depleted; tired, low blood sugar
- Short on time

Ways to Avoid

Here are some ideas for ways to try to avoid bias:

- Recognize we all have a bias
- Stop and think! Learn to mistrust your first impressions
- Don't ignore differences – be curious
- Challenge negative assumptions and stereotypes
- Don't consciously try to suppress bias
- Don't be too hard on yourself – the emotional impact makes bias more likely
- Seek positive examples and role models
- Have fun!
- Keep processes simple
- Schedule demanding cognitive or emotional work away from people decisions

Avoiding Bias When Recruiting

- Recruiting new employees, or promoting within organizations, is one of the most obvious areas where bias can be at play. Here are some shorthand tips for how to minimize the risk:
- Allow for flexibility – flexibility in terms of screening and selecting – only criteria necessary for the job should be listed as required
- Consider the use of language – avoid stereotypical language, like a go-getter, people person, results-driven
- Examine evaluation tools – clear list of relevant criteria
- Look for non-traditional evidence – overcoming adverse hardship
- Take your time and reduce distractions
- Consider the recruitment panel
- Consult suppliers/agencies – How biased are the agencies who provide you candidates?

Inclusive Leadership

Here are 6 inclusive leadership behaviors that will help avoid the pitfalls of bias in the workplace and unlock innovation:

- Ensure everyone is heard
- Make it safe to propose novel ideas
- Give team members decision-making authority
- Share credit for success
- Give actionable feedback
- Implement feedback from the team

Contact us for additional information on Unconscious Bias and other DEI training and development.

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