Unconscious Bias

Diversity Minute, 3/3/2021
Brain researchers estimate the human mind takes in **11 million** pieces of information per second. Out of those 11 million signals, our brain is only consciously aware of **40** pieces of information!
Unconscious Bias

Biases can form towards anything, including...

- race
- ethnicity
- gender
- orientation
- physical differences
- weight
- religion
- spiritual or non-spiritual
- communication style
- hobbies
- familial status
- style of dress
- educational background
- place in career

When people don't fit our internalized expectations, we can sometimes have difficulty seeing their talents, motivations, and potential clearly — which can mean we interact with them less effectively.

These judgments can give individuals and groups both unearned advantage and unearned disadvantage in the workplace, which does not result in an inclusive culture.
Inclusive culture

What does an inclusive group culture look like?

- People are respected, valued, and seen.
- Conscious of others’ preferences and respectful of that
- Reaching out actively to make new members feel included and supported
- Psychological safety
- People can be their authentic selves.
- People feel safe sharing their ideas.
- Each person is able to bring leadership, influence, and knowledge to the group.
- Everyone is able to add value to the group.
How biases are formed

Biases are shortcuts our brain forms based on:

- our own experiences
- things other people tell us
- media portrayals
- institutional influences
- other external influences

When faced with situations or people that appear to fit into these "mental maps" our mind has created, we make a number of automatic associations. Not surprisingly, our perceptions and assumptions based on these automatic associations are often incorrect.

Because our unconscious biases are so hidden from ourselves, it takes some work to disrupt them, but it can be done through active reflection and practicing inclusive behaviors.
Implicit Association Test

According to a global online research study with over 200,000 participants, 76% of participants are biased toward associating men with careers.

68% of participants are biased toward white skin over dark skin.

Source: Project Implicit Website, (2015). (Note that current global results may change over time. Current results are displayed if you choose to take an Implicit Association test and appear at the conclusion of the test.)

Disabilities

A 2014 report showed that 67% of the British public feel uncomfortable talking to disabled people ...

... and 36% tend to think of disabled people as not as productive as others.


Gender

Students at Columbia University were presented with a business case study for Heidi Roizen, a real-world CEO, and asked to rate their impressions of her. A separate section of the class received the same case study, but with the name changed to a man's name — Howard. The group that received the case study with the male name judged "Howard" more positively than the same identical study with Heidi's actual name on it. Students judged Heidi as more power hungry and self-promoting and less likable than Howard.


Names on Resumes

A name on a resume can imply one's race/ethnicity, nationality and characteristics associated with these groups. Research by the US National Bureau of Economic Research, as well as a Canadian study, found that ethnic names can have a significant influence on the evaluation of resumes. The studies found significant differences in the number of callbacks for interviews between Asian, Hispanic, Black, and White-sounding names, when used on identical resumes.

Sources:
Gedanken experiment

- Think of the people you feel comfortable with and work effectively with.
  - What is the reason for your comfort level and effective collaboration with these individuals?
  - Do they have any major traits in common with each other?

- Now think of the people you feel less comfortable with or connect with less frequently.
  - What is the reason for your comfort level and ineffective collaboration with these individuals?
  - Do they have any major traits in common with each other?
Consider hiring a new project leader from a pool of applicants with equal qualifications. You have...

- a mother of three
- a man working remotely from another country
- an introverted and quiet nonbinary person who doesn’t share much about their personal life, and
- a young college graduate who is a relaxed jokester

Who would you choose as your next project leader?

Why? What assumptions did you make about each of these people?

Can you think of ways that each of their qualities could make someone MORE productive and BETTER at their job?
Combat unconscious bias

Confront your biases.

Bias operates on quick judgements and assumptions. Examining them more deeply is a good way to counter bias.

Ask yourself what assumptions you have made and examine whether they are valid.

Different working styles and backgrounds have their own strengths. The next time you catch yourself making a judgement about someone’s background or working preference, ask yourself, could this be an asset?
Ensure all voices are heard!

- Who gets heard in our group meetings? Department meetings?
- Who may not always be heard?
- How can we encourage contribution and ensure different viewpoints are heard?

- Make efforts to include folks in widely dispersed time zones.
- Appreciate each person’s contributions.
- Be an ally when someone is being interrupted!
- Offer up affirmations when someone seems hesitant.

If you tend to express ideas frequently and assertively...

If you notice another person struggling to be heard...

If you frequently feel unheard...

If you notice one person receiving credit for another person’s ideas or work...

If you spend more time listening and thinking than speaking in meetings...

Make sure to spend time listening too! Solicit others’ input and consider their viewpoints fully.

Call attention to the person trying to speak and ask others to give them attention for a moment.

Solicit help in making yourself heard! Eric or another group member can be your ally in meetings.

When someone deserves credit and praise for a good idea, be sure to give it to them and ensure others are aware.

If you have insights you didn’t get a chance to share in a meeting, follow up on Slack or by email!
Combat unconscious bias

Make a habit of asking questions!

- Ask for feedback
- Ask people how you can work together more effectively
- Ask people when you aren’t sure what their thoughts, feelings, or motivations are
- In mentoring relationships, see if you can ask questions rather than immediately provide your own solutions. This shows your confidence in the mentee’s ability to come to their own conclusions.
Combat unconscious bias

Address misunderstanding and resolve disagreements.

Don’t let an unpleasant interaction, misunderstanding, or disagreement deter and turn into an enduring spot of conflict.

If you have a misunderstanding, clear it up right away!

If you have a substantial disagreement, that can actually be a benefit by offering the opportunity to explore a meaningful difference of perspectives, leading us to a more thoughtful solution. To reap the value of disagreement, you must fully explore the diverse perspectives at issue.

Find a mediator if a disagreement is too spiky or ornery!
Combat unconscious bias

Try to avoid stressful situations.

Bias is a shortcut our brains use to draw rapid conclusions. Our brains are particularly likely to resort to biased thinking when we are under stress.

- Keep a calm demeanor
- Don’t speak loudly or interrupt
- Pause before you speak
- Eliminate distractions
- Relieve time pressures when possible
Sources

Microsoft eLesson: Unconscious Bias