

Addressing unconscious bias

BY MARIANNE DE PIERRES





Unconscious bias and really focusing on inclusion is the next frontier.

Dame Vivian Hunt, McKinsey & Company

When facing a tough decision, we are often encouraged to listen to our instincts. But have you ever wondered how your 'gut' makes a call?

The answer is not - as we would like to imagine - through some innate, mystical intelligence we carry inside. More likely, it's springboarding off the unconscious or implicit biases that collect silently and unchallenged inside us. These hidden thought structures are informed by our environment and our life experiences. They 'feel' right and offer us seductive short cuts to decision making, often undermining other vital sources of insight such as thoughtfulness, evidence and reflection.

Within organisations, our hidden biases can shape hiring practices, workplace culture and opportunities for promotion. Generally, they often work against inclusion and diversity. However, this is not only a values and culture issue, as research shows clear links between diversity and financial performance. One study by McKinsey back in 2018, showed that companies with less gender and ethnic diversity were almost 30% less profitable.

Our biases, it seems, can absolutely affect our bottom line.

THE NATURE OF UNCONSCIOUS BIASES

In order to counteract their impact, we need to recognise the shapes that these unconscious biases take.

Here are eight common indicators you may recognise in yourself and others:

01 Affinity bias:

When we employ someone that we feel an affinity for because they seem to share similar sensibilities, interests and even backgrounds, we are building a culture of people like us. Though this can deliver a positive result, it can also work against the healthy diversity we need to build a resilient organisation.

02 Attribution bias:

This form of bias is grounded in judgements made on false assumptions. The best way to combat it is to take the time to be more accurately informed. The first thought we have is not always the accurate one.

03 Conformity bias:

This can also be framed as peer group pressure or the tendency of people to behave and think like those around them without considering their individuality or making their own ethical decisions.

04 Contrast bias:

Every day we contrast and compare behaviour, events and situations. Though a completely reasonable way to make sense of the world, it can also lead to quick, unfounded assumptions. Imagine interviewing a very extroverted person followed by someone who is significantly more introverted. Depending on your preferences, you may use the contrast to make a recruitment decision, instead of evaluating the two upon individual merit.

05 Gender bias:

There are many studies around the inequitable distribution of advantages of one gender over another – and the repercussions that can have on culture and profitability.

06 Halo effect:

This relates to the human tendency to elevate our opinion of another person based on data about them that might impress us. For example, we might know someone we're considering hiring went to a top tier university or is from a prominent business family. This bias is often seen in sport, where opportunities are given to children whose parents have an athletic pedigree.

07 Beauty bias:

As the name suggests, this is experienced by people with traditionally good looks. Studies into this bias show, amongst other things, that traditionally attractive people are discriminated against when applying for less desirable jobs as there is a perception that they will be dissatisfied. Conversely, there is a pro-attractiveness bias around recruiting for more desirable jobs.

08 Conformity bias:

This bias is one most people are familiar with, as it concerns how we interpret and recall information to validate our own beliefs. In the workplace this can lead to flawed decision making. For instance, if we have a negative experience with someone at work, and consequently see them in a poor light, it may be easier to devalue their work practices as well.

OVERCOMING BIAS

It's generally agreed that overcoming bias can be difficult, even with targeted training programs. Experts believe this is because programs focus on the individual, while ignoring the systems that continue to reinforce these prejudices.

Some studies even describe diversity training as pointless, while others say that unconscious bias interventions can increase concern and change attitudes, but not behaviour. Certainly, there is still more to learn about the pathways to behavioural change.

The World Economic Forum, however, suggest that the following actions may help to reduce the impact of hidden biases:

- **Collect data.** Use hard evidence to measure goals and compare to the industry's direction. Data can be a very convincing ally when looking for buy in. But beware subjective technologies and audit business solutions for biases.
- **Change pace.** Bias is most potent and prevalent when decisions are made at speed. This means slowing down, acknowledging that first impressions aren't always right and exercising control over our thoughts. This can also mean deliberately seeking out other sources of feedback.
- **Change systems.** If organisations champion diversity and inclusion training then they are signalling its value, which may, in time, alter group norms. So, it's important to put in place the policies and programs that support what we want to be seen as acceptable behaviour. It's equally important that these policies and programs are regularly audited.

While there are no sure-fire ways to change unconscious bias, there are increasing opportunities to unravel hidden mindsets and pursue new learning pathways that will lead to more transparency, not the least of which is to begin by taking Harvard University's Implicit Association Test.

And next time your 'gut' kicks in to help you make a decision, take a moment to interrogate its motives.



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FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

3 Cognitive Biases Perpetuating Racism at Work – And How to Overcome Them (Adwoa Bagalini, 2020, World Economic Forum) <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/08/cognitive-bias-unconscious-racism-moral-licensing/>

Addressing Unconscious Bias (Geena Davis, 2015, McKinsey & Company) <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/addressing-unconscious-bias>

Delivering through Diversity (Vivian Hunt et al, 2018, McKinsey & Company) <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/delivering-through-diversity>

Perceived Entitlement Causes Discrimination Against Attractive Job Candidates in the Domain of Relatively Less Desirable Jobs (Margaret Lee et al, 2018, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology) <https://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/psp-ppsi000114.pdf>

Pointless Diversity Training: Unconscious Bias, New Racism and Agency (Mike Noon, 2017, Work Employment & Society) https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319440804_Pointless_Diversity_Training_Unconscious_Bias_New_Racism_and_Agency/related

Project Implicit: Implicit Association Test <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

The Mixed Effects of Online Diversity Training (Edward H Chang et al, 2019, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences) https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332151244_The_mixed_effects_of_online_diversity_training

Unconscious Bias (Queensland Government, 2020) <https://www.forgov.qld.gov.au/unconscious-biases>