

Unconscious bias

What is Unconscious bias?

Unconscious bias (also known as implicit bias) refers to unconscious forms of discrimination and stereotyping based on race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, age, and so on (see types of UB below). Behaviour which reinforces the bias is noticed, whilst behaviour which does not is ignored. This is how decisions based on unconscious bias are justified.

Everyone has unconscious biases. The brain receives information from our experiences and what we read, hear, or see in the media and from others. The brain uses shortcuts to speed decision-making, and unconscious bias is a by-product. Sometimes, this sort of quick decision-making is helpful, for example, if faced with a dangerous situation. However, it is not a good way to make decisions when dealing with employees.

Unconscious bias – key points

- It involves making assumptions, pre-judgements, and stereotypes.
- Affects relating to a person in a +ve or -ve way as a result.
- It is natural and unintended.
- It can affect decisions.
- It can be mitigated.
- To tackle it requires an understanding of the implications of this.

Unconscious bias in the Workplace

Unconscious bias at work can influence recruitment, promotion, staff development and recognition decisions, leading to a less diverse workforce. Employers can overlook talented workers and instead favour those who share their own characteristics or views. In the modern workforce, up to five generations can work in the same organisation; this creates a challenging environment for interaction between generations in the workplace.

Research has shown that often our unconscious bias stems, to a significant extent, from internal work or social cultures and prejudices rather than pre-existing personal attitudes. Such cultures are perpetuated by internal norms (e.g., policies, training, procedures etc), implying that should a person wish to address their own unconscious bias they must address their internal work or social culture first and foremost.

When assessing the behaviour in others, instead of saying 'it's a few bad apples in a barrel of overall good ones', the key is recognising that implicit bias is a systemic rather than an individual issue. It is important to consider this before apportioning shame or blame to an individual for their implicit bias. This no-shame approach decreases the defensive response among reluctant people, helping them hear, accept and rectify the issue.

Types of Unconscious Bias

- **Affinity bias:** This is a tendency to like someone like us regarding gender, race, ethnicity, or nationality.
- **Attribution bias** happens when we attribute certain notions to a person because of our prior interactions with and observations of another person of the same gender, race, sexual orientation etc.
- **Ageism:** We make assumptions and commit biases based on a person's age. While age is not a measure of someone's intelligence or maturity, we unconsciously judge them based on this.
- **Confirmation bias:** This inclination happens when we want something or someone to confirm our bias towards them.
- **Conformity bias:** This is also known as peer pressure. We want to conform to the people or things around us even though they contradict our personal beliefs and principles.
- **The Halo Effect:** This happens when we unconsciously put someone on a pedestal just because there's something about them, that we find impressive.
- **The Horns Effect:** The opposite of the Halo Effect. We unconsciously dislike everything about someone because they have some negative characteristics we don't like.
- **Contrast bias:** You compare one or several things you come in contact with to another similar thing, which can happen simultaneously or consecutively.
- **Gender Bias:** This is a common bias and happens when one gender is favoured over the other because of stereotypes or based on your previous experience.
- **Name bias:** You make an unconscious judgement based on a person's name, especially those of foreign origins.
- **Beauty bias:** Another common bias where we unconsciously assume attractive people are more competent, qualified, and successful.

Unconscious bias is:

- Everyday
- Automatic
- Hand-wired
- None of us are immune



Tackling unconscious bias

Awareness

- Start with self-awareness. Being aware of your own bias and how this affects your work with others (i.e., your own worldview)
- Be aware of unconscious bias in others.
- Try to recognise the difference between another person's worldview from your own.
- Focus on the positive behaviour of people and not negative stereotypes.
- Continuously reflect on your own cultural assumptions and bias. How does this affect how I work with others?

Education

- Increase your knowledge, and deepen understanding and awareness through training, research (reading literature from minority groups) and participation (charity work)
- Stay informed, talk to others and take an interest in changing industry standards.
- Use of reflective practices and supervision
- Learn from others and be curious and authentic with colleagues and friends.

Procedure

- Do not rush decisions; take your time and consider issues and biases properly.
- Justify decisions by evidence and record the reasons for your decisions, for example, during a recruitment exercise.
- Employers should implement policies and procedures which limit the influence of individual characteristics and preferences.

Diversity

- Try to work with a broader range of people and get to know them individually. This could include working with different teams or colleagues based in different locations.
- Be authentically curious.

Discussion and feedback culture

- Use humour to recognise differences of opinion and background (use wisely).
- Have the courage to raise concerns with that person (about their and your own bias).