

# Here Is Why Organisations Need to be Conscious of Unconscious Bias

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## What is Unconscious Bias?

The Equality Challenge Unit defines this as implicit bias happening by our brains making incredibly quick judgments and assessments of people and situations without us realizing. These can be influenced by our background, cultural environment, and personal experiences, and results in feelings and attitudes towards others based on race, ethnicity, age, appearance, accent, etc. Also termed as implicit social cognition, it includes both favorable and unfavorable assessments, activated without an individual's awareness or intentional control. It is important to distinguish these from the known biases, that people can often conceal for the fear of being politically incorrect.

Are these unconscious biases hardwired into our brains as an evolutionary response, or do they emerge from assimilating information that we see around us? These kinds of bias are a result of our upbringing, where we've grown up, the social structure that we have been a part of, what kind of people and social groups we have been exposed to, what kind of ideas have had an impact on us, and what we see in media around us. Stereotypes are one such kind of implicit bias, where certain groups of people can be labeled by comments such as "all teenagers are lazy". Experiments have shown that the brain categorizes people by race in less than one-tenth of a second, about 50 milliseconds before determining sex.

## **Why is it important to think about Unconscious Bias?**

Unconscious bias can affect workplaces and organizations. It can introduce unintentional discrimination and result in poor decision-making. Unconscious Bias can be a huge setback in creating a truly diverse and inclusive organization. It has been shown that such biases can have an impact on recruitment, mentoring and promotions. This can hamper equal opportunities for women in terms of selection and progression to a high-level management and leadership role.

A Yale University study found that male and female scientists, both trained to be objective, were more likely to hire men, and consider them more competent than women, and pay them \$4,000 more per year than women. I have previously written about how women can have an unconscious bias against women. Tests have shown that even avowed feminists think of men as more competent than women. Women treat men with more respect. Women are sexist too, often unconsciously. A toxic and vicious cycle can be created that means that people tend to favor people just like themselves. So when there are white men at the top, they are likely to favor, mentor and invest in more white men just like themselves. This creates a workplace which is not diverse or inclusive and the cycle of unconscious bias against women and other minority communities is perpetuated. It also means that men in leadership roles are less likely to mentor and support women in advancing in the organization.

Although we talk about diversity and inclusivity and conscious explicit bias, organizations do not train their staff in recognizing and acknowledging implicit and ingrained cultural and social conditioning that can affect their decision-making and attitudes towards others. Research has shown the extent to which we are unconsciously biased: 67% of the British public admits to feeling uncomfortable talking to a disabled person, and 80% of employers admit to making decisions based on regional accents.

Unconscious Bias can sometimes become ingrained in an organization's policy structures and work practices. It can also be a result of certain policies implemented by the organization, such as 'flexible' work practices, allowing employees to have a flexible work arrangement to accommodate families and other needs. However, unconsciously this can be perceived as 'lazy', and 'not pulling their weight' by other employees, and flexible workers might be seen as losing money and income for the organization. This is an unconscious bias that can exist without the employees realizing it to be the case.

## **What can organizations do about Unconscious Bias?**

Implicit biases are pervasive. Everyone possesses them, even people who are trained for objectivity such as judges and scientists. Here are some strategies on how to tackle unconscious bias in the workplace:

1. **Label and name the types of biases that can occur:** By discussing the unconscious biases and bringing them to a conscious level, everyone in the organization can be aware of how these can influence their decision-making while hiring, promotions and mentoring. Discussing these biases and naming them can make them more explicit and transparent, and transform organizational culture. Kenan Flager Business School says that there is affinity bias (tendency to be warmer towards people like us), halo effect (tendency to think everything good about a person because we like them) and perception bias (tendency to stereotype certain groups without being able to make objective decisions about them). Another well-

known bias is conformity bias, where a person is most likely to lean towards a certain decision if they sense that more than 75% of their group have a particular view. It is the tendency to conform to the group. The beauty bias is, unfortunately, a well-known factor in hiring and promotions, and success in the workplace. A scientific study by the British Medical Journal has shown that height and body mass index can determine the social-economic status and earning power of an individual, particularly for women, where overweight and short women are at a much higher disadvantage than tall and thin men, earning as much as £1500 per year less than their lighter and taller counterparts.

2. **Re-organize structures and systems to create a truly diverse workplace:** Rigorous training of the staff in a careful and considerate manner where there is an acknowledgment that these hidden biases are bound to exist, and it is natural to carry these with us is important. Anonymous resume audits, surveys of current and previous employees, and focus groups are helpful, where the discussion is framed around fairness and inclusivity. A regular diversity audit of the organization is crucial to be accountable, as well as track the hiring and promotional processes and pathways to ensure that no biases are affecting the progress of certain groups. Certain workplace behaviors such as bullying can be a result of implicit biases, and often legally it is hard to prove and tackle. Allowing anonymous complaints process and peer mentoring can also help.
3. **Create collaborative projects and programs:** Projects that link the organization to the wider community, and those that help create a positive image of certain groups that are often stereotyped on the basis of their sex or race will reinforce the need to address and acknowledge the hidden biases. These will create an environment of honesty and transparency where the employees are compelled to confront their own social and cultural conditioning. Enabling systems where employees are rewarded for volunteering to bridge these gaps and those who successfully voice and address their hidden biases sends a really positive message to the rest of the community.

The most important thing is to acknowledge that hidden biases exist, and create an openness and willingness to communicate and discuss these without being judged and ostracised. Unconscious Bias can be tackled when the organizational policies and leadership enables a positive working environment, where the members feel pride in supporting others, and are rewarded for actively demonstrating a will to overcome such biases and acting to increase diversity in the workplace.

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