

Spotlight on Unconscious Bias



Unconscious bias at work can influence decisions in recruitment, promotion, staff development and recognition and can lead to a less diverse workforce. Employers can overlook talented workers and instead favour those who share their own characteristics or views

ACAS (2018)

What Is Meant by Unconscious Bias?

'Unconscious bias' is the term used to describe having prejudices and unsubstantiated opinions which you have not thought through or even thought about for a long time, if ever. Your unconscious biases and prejudices are hidden to you. This means that your opinion on and reactions to whatever the biases are about will be automatic

Biases and prejudices come about in the first place for any number of reasons. They might relate to the way our parents brought us up, or they might have to do with the culture we grew up in. Sometimes something has happened in our past, often things we do not remember, which are having an irrational impact on us in the 'here and now'.

A lot of our biases and prejudices become unconscious, or are never conscious in the first place, because that way they work better! Part of our mind believes that having these biases and prejudices are keeping us safe from something it perceives as threatening. If our mind can get us reacting in accordance with these prejudices without having to think them through, then valuable time can be saved. (In fact, it's exactly the same sort of time saving mechanism that allows you to get dressed in the morning without having to consciously think it through every time, -other, maybe, than what you're going to wear!)

But the terms 'bias' and 'prejudice' also mean that this unconscious belief is not very fair, is irrational, or simply inaccurate in some way.

Disadvantageous Outcomes

Your unconscious biases and prejudices can therefore result in you;

- failing to respond to real threats or weaknesses, or
- seeing threats and weaknesses when there are none really there,
- overlooking a person for recruitment, promotion, reward or development for an irrational and/or unfair reason,
- passing up a business opportunity that would have brought real benefits, or
- entering into business relationships that turn out to be very disadvantageous.

For example, a number of accounting and auditing scandals in the recent past have been attributed to corruption and criminality. But often it turns out that the mistakes made were the result of unconscious bias: “because of the often subjective nature of accounting and the tight relationship between accounting firms and their clients, even the most honest and meticulous of auditors can unintentionally distort the numbers in ways that may mask a company’s true financial status” as Max Bazerman and his co-authors wrote in the Harvard Business Review in 2002.

It is important that you observe yourself objectively to find out what this is; other people may want to comment on this as well! In his book ‘Blink’ Malcolm Gladwell discusses the fact that less than 15% of American men are over six foot tall, yet almost 60% of corporate CEOs are over six foot tall. Somewhere, in the American mind, is an unconscious – and unsubstantiated – bias that tall men make better CEOs.

This unconscious bias has been found to exist in all sorts of situations, even as far as boys being called upon more frequently than their female classmates when they raise their hands to answer a question.

Uncovering and Countering Unconscious Bias

How can you find out what your – or your organisation’s – unconscious biases are?

This is one reason why so many organisations keep statistics on the ethnicity, gender, age and any disability of the people they recruit, promote, reward and put forward for professional training. A disparity between the information provided by these statistics and the general make-up of the population can then be addressed. Direct and indirect discrimination to put right imbalances is illegal in most cases of course, but so is any unfair discrimination that caused those imbalances in the first place. Sometimes simply knowing that unconscious bias has been at work can remedy the situation; other times positive action needs to be taken, such as encouraging certain sectors of the population or workforce to apply for jobs, promotion etc., or training recruiters and managers to overcome bias.

Furthermore, self-aware leaders make efforts to uncover and counteract their own unconscious biases and prejudices. As described in the Leadership Essential Leaflet on Self Awareness, they consistently try to start conversations with, and listen to, a diverse range of individuals; not just by age, ethnicity, gender etc. but even from different parts of their own country. Reading a range of newspapers and journals also helps you keep an open mind, and will draw attention to any prejudices you have missed.



References

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