

Member's Quarterly

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Feature

Overcoming Unconscious Bias in the Workplace

How to address this serious workforce issue



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Unconscious bias is hitting the news. From Bay Street to Main Street to Starbucks, the impact of unspoken bias is real and harmful to the workplace. Bias stands in the way of making correct decisions in hiring and promoting. It also has a vital impact on your staff and the workplace in general. Let's explore how we can become aware of our own bias and stop it in the workplace.

First, let's define it. "Unconscious bias refers to a bias that we are unaware of, and which happens outside of our control. It is a bias that happens automatically and is triggered by our brain making quick judgments and assessments of people and situations, influenced by our background, cultural environment and personal experiences." (ECU: 2013 Unconscious bias in higher education)

We all have a bias. How do we identify it and then what do we do about it? In addressing unconscious bias, employers can assist in creating an inclusive, civil and respectful workplace.

Research indicates that unconscious biases are prejudices we have, yet are uninformed of. They are "mental shortcuts based on social norms and stereotypes." (Guynn, 2015). Biases can be based on skin colour, gender, age, height, weight, introversion versus extroversion, marital and parental status, disability status (for example, the use of a wheelchair or a cane), foreign accents, where someone went to college and more (Wilkie, 2014). If you can name it, there is probably an unconscious bias for it.

Hence if we think we are unbiased, we may have unconscious adverse thoughts about people who are outside our own group. If we spend more time with people from other groups, we are less likely to feel prejudice against them.

This universal tendency toward unconscious bias exists because bias is rooted in our brain. Research shows that our brain has evolved to mentally put things together to make sense to us. The brain sorts all the information it is blasted with and labels that information with universal descriptions that it may rapidly access. When we categorize these labels as either good or bad, we tend to apply the rationale to the whole group. Many of the conclusions are taken from previous experiences and learnings.

In an article, "The Real Effects of Unconscious Bias in the Workplace", a few of the known unconscious biases that directly impact the workplace include:

- Affinity bias is the tendency to warm up to people like ourselves.
- Halo effect is the tendency to think everything about a person is good because you like that person.
- Perception bias which is the inclination to form stereotypes and assumptions about specific groups that make it awkward to make an objective judgement about members of those groups.
- Confirmation bias is the openness for us to pursue evidence that sanctions our pre-existing beliefs or experiences.
- Group think is a bias which occurs when people attempt to fit into a specific crowd by mirroring others or holding back opinions and views. This results in individuals losing part of their characteristics and causes workplaces to miss out on originality and creativity.

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Horace McCormick's research found more than 150 identified unconscious biases, making the task of rooting them out and addressing them daunting. For many organizations however, identifying as many as possible and eliminating them has become a high priority.

You can address discrimination issues by increasing your awareness of your unconscious biases and by developing strategies that make the most of the talents and abilities of your team members.

Unconscious behaviour is not just individual – it influences organizational culture as well. This explains why so often our best attempts at creating corporate culture change with diversity efforts seem to fall frustratingly short – to not deliver on the promise they intended.

What you can do

- Be aware consciously of your bias
- Focus more on the people, on their strengths
- Increase exposure to biases
- Make small changes
- Be pragmatic
- Challenge stereotypes and counter-stereotypical information
- Use context to explain a situation
- Change your perception and relationship with out-group members
- Be an active bystander
- Improve processes, policies and procedures

Also, managers can play a crucial role in unearthing these hidden biases by declaring their intentions to be non-biased. They can also provide transparent performance appraisals with emphasis on the employee's exceptional abilities and skills, and grow a stronger mindfulness of their own unconscious principles.

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