



Discovering and Understanding Unconscious Bias

Unconscious Bias in the Workplace

Unconscious bias exists everywhere in the world. The reality is that no one is a perfect being and everyone has biases to some extent, even if he/she does not realize it. Unconscious biases are the attitudes and stereotypes people attribute to another group of people that affect how they understand and interact with a person or group. These biases can be extremely hurtful to those affected without you even knowing what you did. Many assume these biases only apply to race, gender, and age; however, there are over 150 types of unconscious bias. You may have never thought about them but as you grow up, your environment, surroundings, culture, and key influencers all shape your belief systems. People are inherently programmed to allocate positive qualities to others who appear to be like themselves or belong to the same social or ethnic group. It is important to note that unconscious biases do not need to be permanent, as you can increase your awareness and adapt your behaviors.



100% of people have unconscious biases to some degree

The key to changing these biases is first becoming aware of what they are. People need to take a deeper look into how these judgements affect others as it is often overlooked, even by Fortune 500 CEOs. Taking time to learn about what unconscious biases are is the first step to fixing the problem, but it is not the last. This article will reveal the impact implicit bias has, the most overlooked biases, and be a guide to help you solve this problem.

The Effects of Unconscious Bias

The Cost of Unconscious Bias

To lead a successful team, you need trust, authenticity, respect, and reliability. These are not attainable when you allow biases to affect decision making. Associates lose motivation to work, do not feel comfortable sharing ideas, and in the end, they may even leave the company.



Losing your top talent because of hurtful and ignorant comments or poor decision making can negatively impact your team, undermine the group's trust, and reduce productivity. A study conducted by the Center for Talent Innovation found that employees who experienced a form of implicit bias were **3x** more likely to be disengaged in the workplace. This is detrimental as disengagement costs U.S. companies approximately \$500 billion every year according to Gallup. In addition, the study revealed that **34%** of people did not share their ideas in the last six months because they experienced some form of unconscious biases. This impedes innovation and teams can often struggle when members do not act as one. If the problem continues, employees will leave as it becomes an unenjoyable work environment and feel their voices are not heard, let alone utilize. Gallup found that people who experienced implicit bias were **3x** as likely to want to leave their current company in less than a year. Losing high-performing employees is detrimental to any company so the question has now become, "How do we eliminate these biases so all may flourish in the workplace?"

The First Step

The first step to eliminating these biases is learning what they are. You must first be aware of your own biases before you can address them. Take time to read the following bullet points and think back to the last encounter you had with this person and how you acted. Place yourself in his/her shoes and think how it could have been perceived by others.

Common Unconscious Biases

- Race
- Gender
- Age
- Religion
- Height
- Hair Length
- Underweight
- Overweight
- Tattoos
- Drug Addiction
- Introvert
- Extrovert
- Sexual Orientation
- Body Piercings
- Dress/Clothes
- Surname
- Disability
- Single Parent
- Victim of Abuse
- Socioeconomic Status
- Geographic Location
- Education
- Jobless
- Diet
- Politics
- Music
- Vocabulary
- Mental Health
- Men Taking Off Work
- Women Taking Off Work

Who It Affects

After reading each of the bullets, you can start to see how biases affect the way we view people who seem different than us. Unconscious biases can affect a decision around who receives a promotion, a great assignment, a recognition award, etc. For example, a manager may need an employee to go on a business trip. However, if he/she believes a single parent does not want to go because of the childcare, it can cause major problems as it may impede on career advancement. Single parents are some of the hardest working people on the planet; however, if they are passed up time and time again, how will they ever advance? In this case, the manager should discuss with the single parent and determine if he/she would like to go. This creates an opportunity rather than closed off potential.

How to Raise Your Self-Awareness

It is difficult to truly see yourself close enough to identify these biases. However, there are some great resources you can use to help you. One of the most popular is the Harvard Implicit Bias Test. It contains over a dozen online assessments that can help you identify your own unconscious biases. These are extremely helpful because you can focus on these areas and make changes.



The Role of a Leader

Now that you are aware these biases, the next step is ensuring biases are not affecting your decisions in the workplace. Again, the key is recognizing any biases you have and adapting your actions. The scenarios below will help you examine how these biases are hurtful to others.

Hiring/Interviewing

Often, you may not realize how the way you structure questions can introduce bias. For example, imagine an overweight man interviewing for a typical sales job. Questions should never be target towards one individual as these questions are biased in of itself. Managers have been known to ask, “Are you able to go on a plane to travel?” You can rephrase this question by asking “This position requires 25% business travel. Are you okay with this expectation?” This will allow the person to open up and share their experience without feeling offended.

Promotion Decisions

You should never hold anyone back from career advancement due to your own personal opinions about a person. All decisions need to be made based on merit. For example, socioeconomic status can affect a decision. A person who possesses luxury goods can often be seen as powerful and wealthy. A Rolex watch or designer purse may cause you to see them as successful when in fact, it may be misleading and does not automatically indicate success. This is unfair to those who have a great work ethic but never had the opportunity for career advancement.

Recognition

Feeling underappreciated can completely change an employee’s view on his/her job. According to OfficeVibe, employees who feel ignored by their manager are **2x** as likely to be disengaged. Examine your own behaviors. Do you proactively offer recognition to people of all different walks of life or only to those who are like you? Many managers believe they often give positive feedback to team members but in reality, may only pertain to a few employees. Write down who you gave positive reinforcement to through the quarter and be sure to share equally amongst your staff.

Development Opportunities

Many people think of race when they hear the word “diversity,” but it is so much more. It represents a variety of people, ideas, interests, etc. Diversity is clearly major key for success on teams. However, just having diversity is not enough. As a leader, you need to be sure to give project leadership opportunities to everyone, not just people who think like you. Having an equal voice is all people want. Without the ability to lead a team, how can someone demonstrate what he/she is capable of. Look at the last 10 projects you have assigned, keep a running tally of who you have given opportunities to. Have you been fair and equitable in assigning great work? If not, begin to equally distribute large projects.

“We cannot change what we are **not aware of, and once we are **aware**, we cannot help but **change**”**

-Sheryl Sandberg

The Long Journey Ahead

Not Overnight

As destructive as unconscious biases are, the effort to eliminate them does not happen overnight. It will likely take years to see the effects of changes being implemented today. Implicit biases may rearise in your future, so it is important to always be aware of them. Be sure to go out of your way and make it a point that equality is a necessity in your team. Make open and authentic feedback a must as many people feel uncomfortable admitting they have experienced a form of unconscious bias. Hopefully, your own team will begin to see these effects sooner as you can begin the change within your own company.

Harvard Implicit Bias Test:

We recommend that you consider taking the Harvard Implicit Bias Test to raise your awareness. The link is below.

<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

Bottom Line: Communication

Diversity and inclusion are needed in every team. Without them, teams became stagnant and lose innovation. People become unmotivated and disengaged, causing a ripple effect in the company. Be sure to start the change in your team and make yourself aware of any implicit biases you may have.



THE EXECUTIVE EDGE® INC.
Strategy, Structure, Leadership.....Sustainable Success



Summary

- Everyone has some degree of unconscious bias, the first step to eliminating them is making yourself aware.
- Decisions should be made based on performance, not what someone looks like or how they act at home.
- Eliminating implicit biases does not occur overnight, you must work at it consistently to see results.

References

- 1 “Delivering through Diversity.” *McKinsey & Company*, 18 Jan. 2018, www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/delivering-through-diversity.
- 2 *NEW REPORT: Women in the Workplace 2019, 2019*, womenintheworkplace.com/.
- 3 Reeves, Rocio Lorenzo and Martin. “How and Where Diversity Drives Financial Performance.” *Harvard Business Review*, 31 July 2018, hbr.org/2018/01/how-and-where-diversity-drives-financial-performance.
- 4 Sleek, Scott. “The Bias Beneath: Two Decades of Measuring Implicit Associations.” *Association for Psychological Science - APS*, 31 Jan. 2018, www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/the-bias-beneath-two-decades-of-measuring-implicit-associations.
- 5 Strauss, Karsten. *More Evidence That Company Diversity Leads To Better Profits*. *Forbes Magazine*, 21 June 2018, www.forbes.com/sites/karstenstrauss/2018/01/25/more-evidence-that-company-diversity-leads-to-better-profits/.