UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

Understanding Bias to Unleash Potenial™

IDENTIFY BIAS

8 Work Areas Where You're Prone to Unconscious Bias—And What You Can Do About It

It's one thing to know we're all biased—our brains are wired to take mental shortcuts whenever they can, which means we sometimes unknowingly favor (or overlook) certain people or groups based on stereotypes or partial information—but what can we do about it in our day-to-day work?

Plenty, if you slow down and pay attention. Here are common work areas where unconscious bias can do significant damage—hurting your performance and making your co-workers feel excluded or demeaned—along with strategies you can use to help keep your biases in check.

1. Seeking Expertise or Help

Behaviors that may be biased: Approaching only the people you are most friendly or comfortable with rather than those who have the most relevant expertise; overloading people who have trouble saying no

To whom do you go when you need input or advice? Often it's a small group of familiar people. In some instances, that's perfectly appropriate. After all, you trust them, and it can be awkward or time-consuming to approach someone different, even if they are knowledgeable. But in other cases, it's lazy or even biased: "I've seen non-native English speakers who are difficult to understand left out of meetings," one employee explained to us.

Instead of overburdening the same people or excluding important input just because it feels harder to obtain, branch out.

Strategies to try:

- **Ask yourself: Who is really the best expert for my request?** Even if you're less familiar with the person, push yourself to approach them. Not sure who's best? Try asking your go-to expert for a recommendation. And when you approach someone new, explain why you're asking. For example, *"I'm helping my manager with insights on our biggest clients and looking for details beyond the data report. Jasmine recommended you as an expert on the Abra Auto Body account. Would you be willing to talk with me about it?"*
- **For more menial requests, vary whom you ask for help.** Instead of always going to the shy woman in accounting for spreadsheet help or the nerdy guy on your team for tech help, show some respect by mixing up whom you ask.

2. Sharing Small Talk, Jokes, and Commentary

Behaviors that may be biased: Assuming that co-workers you feel close to have a similar view of which topics and jokes are permissible at work; presenting your unfiltered views on social and political issues

Some may bristle at the idea of filtering what they say: *People are so easily offended!* It's not that you should feel afraid to share or should hide your authentic self at work, but if you don't pause to consider how your words might impact others, you stand to hurt not only others' feelings but also your reputation.

In the end, it doesn't matter whether your comment or joke stems from bias—it could still be perceived as biased and, therefore, have a negative effect on others.

Strategies to try:

- **Reflect on what's safe versus what's risky to share at work.** For example, let's say you have close friends who are gay and you share stereotypical jokes with one another—does that mean it's okay to tell those jokes at work? Or if you have a strong opinion about a government policy on immigration or visas, should you share it at work, given that some of your co-workers may be impacted by that policy? The answers will depend on your specific situation. To start figuring it out, proactively sort topics as safe for work and not safe for work. Avoid the latter.
- **Don't say anything about a person you wouldn't say to their face.** This classic anti-gossip tactic pushes you to develop diplomatic, nonjudgmental ways of expressing yourself, and lets you keep your integrity intact should your sentiment get back to the person (as it often does). Take this example a black woman shared with us: "I have afro hair, and a white colleague commented behind my back to another white employee that my hair looked 'odd' and 'wonky.'"

3. Giving Credit and Praise for Ideas and Accomplishments

Behaviors that may be biased: Overlooking or giving less credit to those who don't overtly seek attention or who are less visible in the workplace

Even in a well-intentioned, recognition-friendly work culture, sometimes the loudest or most visible employees get the most credit, even for ideas they restate but aren't theirs. Unfortunately, this leaves others—often shy people, remote workers, contractors, and those from underrepresented groups—out of the spotlight.

Strategies to try:

- **When possible, invite others to voice their ideas directly.** Let's say you need insight about a particular customer. Rather than you asking the account rep and relaying that information to others, could you invite the rep to join a meeting or jump in on a call to share directly with your group? Less secondhand information means less misinterpretation—and less misplaced credit.
- **Build a habit of attaching people's names to their ideas.** You could write the person's name next to your notes on the subject as a reminder. Or practice prefacing what you say with the person's name to give credit (e.g., *"I like Norberto's idea to focus the whole presentation on the client's top priority"*). If you can't remember who said what, at least acknowledge it (e.g., *"I can't remember who said it, but someone on the team had the idea…"*) to avoid appearing like you're trying to co-opt others' contributions.
- **Publicly recognize the accomplishments of a variety of co-workers.** Try regularly giving a teammate a shout-out in team meetings or shared chat channels. If you find yourself defaulting to the same one or two people each time, resolve to look more closely at others' contributions. Specific recognition is memorable: Aim to include one thing you took away from the person's work, such as an idea you'll try or an aspect that impressed you.

4. Creating Work Deliverables

Behaviors that may be biased: Failing to see how a message could land with a certain group of people

"We intended product/advertising campaign/statement X to do Y. Unfortunately, we missed the mark. We do value the diversity of our customer base and workforce…" The news is littered with corporate walk-backs and apologies like these for insensitive language and stereotypical or exploitative portrayals.

While effective research and marketing departments may offer you some safeguards for public deliverables, what about the messages you compose and share every day (both externally and internally)?

Strategies to try:

- **Take time to review written communications.** It takes only a few minutes to review a social media post or read back your email as if you're the recipient before hitting send. At the very least, you may improve your work. And you might just keep yourself from offending someone.
- **For complex or important work, ask a friend with a critical eye or a colleague outside your project team to give honest feedback.** You might ask them specifically how your work will come across to diverse groups and to play devil's advocate and find ways to criticize. Resist the urge to share context on all your hard work and decisions made along the way so that the other person experiences your slides, prototype, report, or marketing campaign just as your intended audience would.
- **Search the internet for others' regrettable mistakes.** They're ridiculously easy to find and will give you an idea of what not to do.

5. Giving Feedback on People's Work, Ideas, and Behaviors

Behaviors that may be biased: Giving less (and less detailed) feedback to minority group members and those from whom less is expected; giving more critical feedback to women than men; giving more condescending feedback to people perceived to have lower status

Research has found that managers (regardless of their gender), tend to give more critical feedback to female direct reports than males. And professors tend to give minority students less critical (and less helpful) feedback, possibly due to having lower expectations or overcompensating to appear unprejudiced.

Could you be doing something similar, even in informal exchanges?

Strategies to try:

- **Distribute your feedback equitably.** Track the feedback you give for a day or a week—is it limited to one or two close team members? If so, who are you leaving out? Consider establishing a feedback quota, wherein you resolve to give a certain amount of feedback to each team member in a specified time period. (For managers, this could be three pieces of positive feedback and one piece of critical feedback per week.)
- **Give feedback that's specific and constructive.** Try mapping your feedback using the formula "I noticed that…" followed by "the impact is…" This format forces you to clearly describe what you've seen and its consequences, positive or negative (e.g., "*I noticed that your chart included stats from each department, which really helped me see how this issue impacts the whole company*"). Using the formula will make your feedback much more useful than a simple "Good job," and will reduce the chance the other person sees your feedback as superficial, condescending, or unfairly harsh (e.g., "You talk too much in meetings").

6. Interacting With—And Judging—Other Teams or Departments

Behaviors that may be biased: Forming blanket views of other groups based on limited information or whether they make your life easier or harder

Little bonds a team more than judging another team: "The branch across town is staffed by a bunch of entitled children"; "the help desk never helps"; "the desk jockeys are clueless about what goes on in the field."

But what do you really know about another team's responsibilities and challenges? Most likely, you have only a sliver of direct experience with certain individuals and a few (likely exaggerated) stories heard through the grapevine that highlight their incompetence. Even if the team's results truly are subpar, there are likely a few competent individuals who are worth knowing and not deserving of the label affixed to the team.

Strategies to try:

- **Get to know someone from the group you most often make fun of or complain about.** You might ask that person for assistance or advice—or just out to coffee or lunch. You could branch out at the next company event and sit next to the person instead of clinging to your team. Or ask to join one of their meetings so you can get a better sense of how they run things. (You're more likely to get a yes if you offer to take notes and give ideas for how your two groups can work together better.)
- **Invite someone from another team to one of your meetings.** They need not sit through the whole session—just a portion when it makes sense. For example, could the person share data or a strategy from their group that could inform yours? Could they share their group's perspective on a challenge your group also faces (maybe the very challenge that leads you to judge the other group in the first place)?

7. Delegating Work

Behaviors that may be biased: Assigning more desirable tasks to certain favored team members and less desirable tasks to others

When project leaders need something done, whom do they ask? Often it's whoever's the closest, easiest choice—the team members who've done it before and whom they trust to do it well. While this lack of deliberation can be a sometimes necessary time saver and resource saver, it also opens the door to bias, leading too many leaders to default to their favorites.

In the end, the go-to team members often feel overburdened, while the rest feel deflated. As one direct report told us: "I want to tell my manager to be fair when giving out work assignments—choosing only his favorite people makes me not want to try."

Strategies to try:

- **Map tasks to team members' strengths, interests, and areas of development.** How's the work distribution on your team? Have the same one or two people received the last 5 or 10 "best" assignments? Certainly, critical tasks should play to a person's strengths. Beyond those, aim for a balance in task distribution, considering ability, capacity, and interest. For example, could you reassign a high-performer's task to someone new? If so, you'll free up a top person's time to take on something more challenging, while providing a growth opportunity to another team member.
- **Randomize or rotate task assignments.** Let's say you need a direct report or peer to do something tedious, like update a weekly call log or take notes in a team meeting. Rather than directly assigning it or waiting for someone to sheepishly volunteer, adopt a policy of rotating these tasks.

8. Evaluating People—As in Managers' Hiring and Performance Review Processes

Behaviors that may be biased: Judging more favorably those who are superficially similar to you; being more critical of a particular gender; assuming that a possible shortcoming (e.g., gap in work history or subpar performance) is negative without probing for an explanation

Managers often speed through their days, toggling between tasks and conversations and quickly making decisions. Sometimes it's helpful to rely on intuition—but it's also a huge bias trap. Without clearly established evaluation standards, it's ridiculously easy for superficial characteristics—even someone's name on a resume—to sway your judgment. We're all susceptible; for example, one team leader told us, "I think that as a female and person of color, I tend to be more understanding or lenient with other minorities. I get frustrated that I've internalized this behavior."

Strategies to try:

- **Structure your hiring process, including resume reviews, interviews, and test projects.**
  - Before you start reviewing resumes, list the three or so core competencies for the position you need to fill. Then ask HR to replace the names on resumes with initials or an identification number, and judge the resumes solely on the core competencies you've identified.
  - Make a list of behavioral and situational questions to ask each person to ensure you make a fair comparison among candidates. Behavioral questions focus on past experiences: *"Tell me about the most significant written report you've completed—how did you go about it?"* Situational questions present hypothetical scenarios: *"How would you respond to a customer complaint that our product is hard to use?"* Take notes and rank answers using a standard candidate-evaluation form.
  - Depending on the job, devise a group interview or a test project for the candidate to complete to ensure that all candidates get a similar experience. Research shows that these formats tend to be better predictors of job performance than traditional one-on-one interviews.
- **For performance evaluations, keep notes over time and measure against established criteria.** Does someone meet expectations or exceed expectations? You can't really know unless you've explicitly listed goals and expectations for the person ahead of time. Document specific examples of how the person has or hasn't met the goals over time to ensure that you're not basing your assessment solely on what's freshest in your mind or on a vague impression (versus a specific instance or result).