UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

Understanding Bias to Unleash Potenial™

IDENTIFY BIAS

7 Common Misconceptions About Unconscious Bias

Unconscious biases are, well, *unconscious*, which makes them hard to identify and understand. Bias is a complex issue and sometimes a controversial one, so is it any wonder there are so many misconceptions around what to do about them? Before you can take steps to operate more fairly and effectively at work, which you absolutely can do (see No. 3), you may need to get your bearings.

Misconception No. 1: Most unconscious bias is around gender and race.

There are a lot of visible company-wide efforts to counter bias around gender and race, like initiatives to reduce pay disparities between groups. And those are important!

But gender and race are far from the whole landscape. We also have biases based on people's job function, age/generation (e.g., "Millennials"), socioeconomic status, family/domestic status (e.g., married, parent), nationality, linguistic ability, veteran status, culture, sexuality, weight, height, physical ability, attractiveness, political affiliation, remoteness (e.g., how much face time they put in at the office), hair color, and even seemingly mundane characteristics like how messy someone's desk is or how powerful they look in their chair.

This doesn't mean you can (or should) monitor every thought and action for bias against every kind of person. But you can revisit the overall fairness of your behaviors and decision making on a regular basis (maybe once every quarter or once every six months), helping build a more inclusive culture at work.

Misconception No. 2: Bias is all about disliking certain groups.

Actually, it's just as often—if not more so—about unintentionally *favoring* certain groups, regardless of whether they're more deserving. Often these groups are the ones we belong to or are favored by society or—much less frequently—are disadvantaged groups that some people push a little too hard to favor in an attempt to right society's wrongs. To surface your biases, then, you need to examine whom you might be biased *toward* (i.e., inclined to favor), not just whom you might be biased *against* (i.e., inclined to overlook, avoid, or harm).

Which groups might you unknowingly be favoring? Even considering this question can help you check your assumptions, as can meeting different types of people who change your expectations of what's possible. For example, when experienced sales manager Shahan Mohideen began hiring people early in his career, he favored candidates who were brash and extroverted. "That's how my sales leaders were, and they were successful," he says. "I didn't know any other way." That all changed when he met a sales leader—one of the best he's ever seen—who was a reserved introvert.

Misconception No. 3: I can't do anything about my unconscious bias.

If you care about how bias affects you and the people around you, then you're already on your way. Researchers find that one of the best predictors of whether people can reduce their prejudice is simply whether they have the desire to.

Here are additional ways to overcome your biases:

- **Learn more about your colleagues and expand your professional network.** Unconscious biases often result from your brain taking shortcuts based on what it assumes to be true. So, there is perhaps no better way to challenge biases than by learning more about the individuals you work with and different kinds of people in general. Take time in everyday work conversations to gauge people's true interests and ambitions, and add people with backgrounds different from yours to your professional network.
- **Create fair-minded processes for things you tend to do off the cuff.** Taking mental shortcuts can lead to favoritism (and reputation-harming mistakes). Track which colleagues you give regular credit and recognition to and branch out if you default to the same few people in your inner circle. Or circulate mundane tasks evenly among the team.
- **Team up to disrupt bias-prone procedures at your company.** For example, you could work with diversity-minded hiring managers to find and tap new sources of diverse job candidates.

Misconception No. 4: Unconscious bias is so subtle that anyone hurt by it is being too sensitive.

Instances of unconscious bias can be so insidious—and in some cases it can be hard to discern whether bias was even at play—that it's easy to understand why some view those who speak out as too sensitive, too soft, or too quick to blame bias for everything. But that's missing the larger point.

The people accused of being too sensitive often aren't upset about, say, a single instance of being talked over in a meeting, but rather about years of dealing with a litany of similar slights. Acts of bias add up. They're like a 90-minute commute—maybe not so bad once, but the true cost becomes apparent over time, after missing out on countless family dinners or learning opportunities.

If you're unsure why someone is distressed about bias, try asking for the person's perspective before passing judgment:

"I've never walked in your shoes, so I admit I can't possibly know your perspective. Do you mind sharing it with me? I think it would help me see where you're coming from."

Misconception No. 5: People are talking about unconscious bias because conscious bias isn't much of an issue anymore.

Bias, prejudice, and discrimination, in all their many forms, are still an ever-present reality in society. In the U.S., for instance, official workplace discrimination charges have risen in the past 20 years. Even when we asked employees to share their experiences with *unconscious* bias, many couldn't help but share experiences with more blatant acts. One respondent said that a colleague who is transgender has been referred to as "it." And multiple female employees spoke of repeated sexual harassment at work, like "unwanted advances" and getting "groped." These instances are examples of behavior that may be illegal and warrant reporting to HR.

To some, by comparison, unconscious bias may not seem as serious. Maybe, maybe not. Because we aren't aware they're happening, unconscious biases can sneak in and lead to systemic inequalities like hiring disparities and pay gaps. The point is that they're all worth striving to overcome—and a lot of the same tips and tactics can be used for both purposes.

Misconception No. 6: It's never worth responding when you're the target of bias in the workplace.

In many cases, reacting to bias carries enough professional risk that many feel all they can do is vent to a trusted colleague or significant other, or let it go. Those are perfectly okay responses, if they're what's best for your situation. But in our survey, several people expressed regret that they hadn't done more. One, recalling a potentially sexist comment from her manager, said, "I decided it was too risky to press further. I wish I had anyway, or come up with a way to do that without putting him on the defensive."

You do have options, and considering them alongside your circumstances can help you determine your best course of action. If you decide to respond, here are two options that may be effective:

- **Speak up by telling the person how bias impacts you.** Since most people don't intend to be biased, calling out someone as such, even when you're right, likely won't be well received—and can increase the risk you take on. It's more effective to assume best intent and share how the bias makes you feel. For example, *"I'm sure you didn't mean it this way, but when you called my talk a 'little presentation,' it made me feel like you didn't value it as much as presentations made by men on the team."*
- **Team up to amplify your voice.** This might mean banding together with colleagues to advocate for more diversity and inclusion initiatives at your company.

Misconception No. 7: Being an ally means my biases are more in check.

If you care about helping those harmed by bias, you might brand yourself an ally—someone doing their part. And if so, there's a decent chance your biases really are more in check. Still, there are plenty of pitfalls lurking for allies, like:

- **Using unbiased acts as license to avoid questioning yourself.** In the U.S., this is known as the "I have black/gay/disabled friends" defense, which can lead to complacency. Researchers find that, ironically, thinking of times when you were unprejudiced tends to temporarily *lower* your guard against bias.
- **Assuming a level of comfort that's unprofessional.** Maybe outside of work you have a diverse set of close friends who joke about obesity, mental health, race, and culture. That doesn't mean such jokes are (or ever will be) welcomed by everyone at work.
- **Overcompensating.** This is the ally with a figurative megaphone, taking every opportunity to shout, "I'm an ally!" While publicly expressing your support helps set a tone of inclusion, it can be overdone. One manager, who is gay, told us about an executive who seems intent on talking about LGBTQ+ issues with him to the point where "other people have commented on it—asking why she always asks me only about gay things."
- **Over attributing behaviors to bias.** While bias is everywhere, so is effort, luck, ability, absent mindedness, and a slew of other factors that affect workplace outcomes. It's important to remind yourself that there can be multiple causes for our behaviors.

The lesson: An ally's work is never done.