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Avoiding Unconscious Bias at Work

Avoiding Accidental Discrimination

By the Mind Tools Editorial Team

Could you be biased in your judgments, without knowing it?

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Say you've got two of your team members in mind for a promotion. Both Jorge and Felipe have great skills and it's a difficult decision, but you decide to go with Jorge because he seems to have good ideas about marketing your product.

You feel like you've made the right choice, based on the evidence. But what if that decision was actually based on something else, without you being aware of it? As difficult as it may be to admit, it's possible to be unconsciously biased regarding race, gender, age, social class, and more. Could your decision not to pick Felipe have been partly because of his social class?

The reality is that our attitudes and behavior toward other people can be influenced as much by our instinctive feelings as by our rational thought processes. And that hidden drive affects everything, from what you'll eat for dinner to who you'll pick to run the next meeting.

Our brains are hardwired to make unconscious decisions, because the number of choices we face every day would be overwhelming if we had to consciously evaluate every single one. That means there is a direct link between our unconscious thinking and our actions and behavior. And when it comes to making choices at work, it's important to know they are not based on bias.

In this article, we'll explore why we make these subconscious assumptions and how we can avoid them.

Why Do We Have Unconscious Biases?

Research suggests that we instinctively categorize people and things using easily observed criteria such as age, weight, skin color, and gender. But we also classify people according to educational level, disability, sexuality, accent, social status, and job title, automatically assigning presumed traits to anyone we subconsciously put in those groups.

The "advantage" of this system is that it saves us time and effort processing information about people, allowing us to spend more of our mental resources on other tasks. The clear disadvantage is that it can lead us to make assumptions about them and take action based on those biases. This results in a tendency to rely on stereotypes, even if we don't consciously believe in them.

No matter how unbiased we think we are, we may have subconscious negative opinions about people who are outside our own group. But the more exposed we are to other groups of people, the less likely we are to feel prejudice against them.

The Impact of Discrimination

While we may not be aware of our prejudices, and prefer not to admit them if we are, they can have damaging consequences on both the way we manage and the people we manage.

Studies show that perceived **discrimination** ⊕ (how people feel when they're being discriminated against) can affect various elements of their performance, such as **commitment** ⊕, **job satisfaction** ⊕ and **work tension** ⊕.

For example, you may be influenced by unconscious bias when you conduct performance management reviews. If your people suspect that is the case, or are just suffering the consequences of your unwitting discrimination, it can lead to mistrust, lowered morale and an increased likelihood of good people leaving your organization.

Just imagine how you'd feel if someone was discriminating against you, based on some superficial aspect of who you are!

If a team member does feel you have discriminated against him or her, even unwittingly, it could impact you in a number of ways. He could begin a grievance procedure against you or even leave your organization, citing discrimination as a reason. Make sure that you understand the discrimination laws that apply in the country where you work, and that you understand your rights and responsibilities, and those of your people.

The Benefits of Diversity

Diversity refers to the variety of differences between people, which can include race, gender, age, sexuality, education, and social class. Worldwide urbanization, communication and mobility have increased workplace **diversity** ⊕ and will likely continue to do so.

Organizations that embrace a diverse workforce and create systems that support it can reap numerous benefits:

- **Increased adaptability.** A team of people from different backgrounds can provide a greater variety of perspectives and solutions to problems. (**Researchers** found that groups of diverse problem solvers can outperform groups with high ability.)

- **Better customer service.** Diverse people bring a greater range of **skills** ⊕ and abilities

along with empathy for different cultures, which can better meet the needs of customers around the world.

- **Greater innovation.** Organizations with a diverse **leadership** ⊕ tend to perform better at this. A **Forbes study** has identified workforce diversity and inclusion as a key driver of internal innovation and business growth.

- **Easier recruitment** ⊕ **and retention** ⊕**.** Welcoming candidates regardless of race, gender, age, or background means you can hire from a larger pool of people, meaning that you are more likely to hire the best people on the job market. Embracing diversity can also improve existing staff members' loyalty to your organization.

How to Avoid Unconscious Bias

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

Recognize Your Own Biases

You need to be honest with yourself about the stereotypes that affect you. For example, you may consciously think that men and women are equally effective leaders but, as a woman, you believe that men perhaps don't have the same level of empathy and people skills as women. That subconscious bias could influence your actions so that male candidates could be excluded from certain roles or positions.

Recruitment is an area where unconscious bias may come into play. As we have seen, people may unwittingly tend to favor applicants from their own familiar backgrounds. But you can take practical steps to reduce this bias. For example, ensure the wording of your job advert does not favor one group of people or another (for instance, use words that appeal equally to men and women). And when you read resumes, read several side by side rather than just one a time. That way you focus more on the performance and skills mentioned than on issues such as gender.

Neurological tests and exercises can uncover unconscious biases and reduce their influence. One way to reveal your own unconscious bias is by taking the **Implicit Association Test** (IAT), created by researchers from Harvard, Virginia and Washington universities. This measures the strength of links you make between concepts, for example

race or sexuality, and evaluation of stereotypes, such as whether those concepts are good or bad.

Another useful exercise is to imagine a positive contact with the group toward whom you may have a bias. **Research** has shown that simply **visualizing** ⊕ a particular situation can create the same behavioral and psychological effects as actually experiencing it. For example, in tests, individuals who imagined a strong woman later showed less gender stereotyping than people who had imagined a vacation.

Also, pay particular attention to your choices when you are feeling tired, rushed or stressed, as these situations tend to activate our biases.

Focus on People

Many organizations are so focused on their processes that they lose sight of their people. Of course you need to find time, for example, to write reports, define job descriptions, and set up performance appraisals, but, it's important that you also establish expectations, communicate plans, and give and receive **feedback** ⊕ to everyone in your team.

Set consistent, **SMART** ⊕ objectives that are fair across the team. These are goals that are Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time Bound. Focus on individuals' **strengths** ⊕ and successes, rather than faults and weakness, while discussing performance issues.

You need to be impartial about facts, but it is helpful to understand people's **feelings** ⊕. Your team members need to feel heard and to have their concerns and frustrations acknowledged. If any of them feel they are being discriminated against, let them explain their situation to someone in your Human Resources department as a safe, open channel. Many perceived unfair behaviors are too subtle to be covered by organizational policies, and some people may feel intimidated by more formal avenues.

Increase Exposure to Biases

Many organizations assume that their policies on **Avoiding Discrimination** ⊕ are robust and work well, so perhaps they fail to weed out some subtle biases. Declare your intentions about valuing a diverse workforce. Saying words out loud, or writing them down, sends a clear message to everyone you work with, as well as to your own subconscious.

Remember, exposure to negative stereotypes can reinforce their influence on your behavior, even if you don't consciously agree with them, so consider providing positive images in the workplace, for example, using posters, newsletters, reports, videos, and

podcasts.

Surround yourself with positive words and images about people you might have stereotypical thoughts about, to help eliminate negative biases. For example, if you are interviewing someone who has just moved from India and you're worried about her language skills, look at positive images of people from India and read their success stories, so you won't subconsciously assume she is not capable of doing the job.

Use **language** ⊕ that is clear and non-biased , such as "he or she" instead of always using "he," in internal documents, job descriptions and other management practices. Also, managers often subconsciously use positive language for preferred team members or groups. Lack of clarity can cause confusion and create openings for bias to emerge.

Take a look at our article on **Managing Mutual Acceptance in Your Team** ⊕ for more ideas and tips.

Key Points

Everyone has subconscious biases. They are simply the brain's way of coping with and categorizing all the information we receive every day. Our tendency to discriminate against a group or type of person may not be intentional, but we can still do something to change it. The more we expose ourselves to ideas, images and words that challenge negative stereotypes, the less discriminatory we will be.

Managers can play a key role in unearthing these hidden biases by declaring their intentions to be non-biased. They can also provide clear, non-partisan performance appraisals that focus on each individual's unique talents and skills, and develop a keen awareness of their own unconscious beliefs.

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