

# Unconscious Bias

**The United Nations describes discriminatory behaviour as that which “takes many forms but all involve some form of exclusion or rejection.” Through ongoing research conducted in various parts of the world, it has become increasingly apparent that colleagues make choices which subtly discriminate in favour of or against certain characteristics in a person or group. These choices are based at an unconscious level, known as Unconscious (Implicit) bias or hidden assumptions. Kings College London describes Unconscious Bias as “the biases we have which we are not in conscious control. These biases occur automatically, triggered by our brain making quick judgements and assessments of people and situations based on our background, cultural environment and our experiences.”**

Biases arise in situations where individuals have the power to influence outcomes through their decision and actions. As a result of these unconscious biases, recruitment processes, promotions, allocation of work, performance reviews, and redundancies are not conducted in a fair and consistent manner. The job/promotion/task is given to a preferred person as opposed to the right person.

Tackling assumptions and acknowledging attitudes is a powerful agent for change. The bridge building process/overcoming barriers requires conscientious responsibility to be aware and a willingness to change one's attitude and organisation's processes. Acknowledging and addressing unconscious bias is a first step in creating business environments where organisations attract, retain and nurture the right skills irrespective of any differences, visible or not visible.

We all hold biases and prejudices and these are manifested in our behaviours towards certain people who look, act and dress differently from us. These thought patterns, assumptions or biases, built up over time become a perceptual scanning process, filtering out certain aspects and allowing key preferences; all based on perceptions and interpretations. In HR, this easily develops into unintentionally unfair hiring and promotion practices.

Author and Journalist Malcolm

Gladwell, asserts in his book *The Tipping Point* that within the first seven seconds of interacting with a stranger, we will make an average of eleven judgements about the person, subconsciously continuing to gather data to justify and maintain these judgements. Ongoing research has shown that there is bias in work-related situations amongst individuals who have the power to influence outcomes through their decisions and actions.

Whilst we fundamentally value differences and strive to be inclusive, scientific research has demonstrated that biases, although thought to be obsolete or extinguished remain a residual debris in most of us. Collaborative research conducted in a number of universities in UK and USA indicates a link between hidden biases and actual behaviour. Simply put, because prejudices are outside our awareness, the subtle (and negative) behaviours that follow are usually ignored or trivialised.

One area in which Unconscious Bias has been dealt with effectively is in the hiring of musicians for orchestra. Historically there was an unspoken view that certain instruments such as trombone, cello, and drums were considered heavy and masculine. It was felt that women did not have the capacity or the stamina to play them as well as men and therefore were not appointed to perform in orchestras. In a move to combat this bias against women, partitions were placed between the musician and the judging committee so all decisions were based solely on what was played and heard, thus avoiding implicit bias towards men. The number of female musicians playing in orchestras has increased as a result.

As Gladwell states, “the fact that there are now women playing for symphony orchestras is not a trivial change. It matters because it has opened up a world of possibility for a group that had been locked out of opportunity... orchestras now hire better musicians and better musicians mean better music.”

Every person should be treated as an individual, and by involving colleagues for their skills and experience as opposed to what you think they represent, managers will create a fair and inclusive working environment. It can also be helpful to reflect on first impressions

of a colleague, as this can help evaluate any stereotypes and establish whether there are any damaging effects as a result of your stereotypes. Studies show that unconscious biases, judgements and assumptions can have a lasting negative impact on the person concerned. By proactively taking action to combat these preconceptions both through personal reflection and direct interaction, it is highly likely that strong robust working relations will emerge.

When it comes to HR and business management, “ignorance is bliss” is a mindset which goes entirely against the grain of inclusivity – lack of awareness is now no longer an excuse. A greater awareness of unconscious bias undoubtedly leads to a more diverse and inclusive culture, made up from a wider, richer pool of talent.



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