

Tackling unconscious bias by ‘un-biasing’ processes



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Some weeks ago, I was invited to take part in a panel debate. Having been very familiar with such events, I asked what the seating arrangements would be and was told there would be high stools. Being rather petite, I didn't much like the idea of having to clamber up onto a high seat, with my legs dangling over the edge looking for all the world like a ventriloquist's dummy – without the ventriloquist!

A conversation to that end took place, and the organizers replaced the stools with comfortable armchairs, and everything went off smoothly.

In this example, the decision to choose high stools was probably taken by an individual who didn't think about the implications and most probably unconsciously expected panellists to be men and therefore of a certain height. It is unlikely that they considered that women are on average much shorter than men, or that a man or woman from Mexico or Vietnam is typically much shorter than someone from the US or Western Europe. I doubt they also considered what people wear, and that a high stool might not therefore be appropriate for a woman in a skirt. And I very much doubt they considered whether any of the panellists had mobility issues.

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The point of telling you this story is that it is an example of unconscious bias, and the influence unconscious bias has on our attitudes and behaviours, especially to other people. It can influence key decisions in the workplace and can contribute to inequality, especially in terms of recruitment, appraisals, or promotion.

Pilot's progress

Unconscious bias is nothing new. Back in the 1940s in the UK, newly-built aircraft were ferried from the factories to their front-line squadrons by pilots of the Air Transport Auxiliary, many of whom were women. There is a famous story of one enormous four-engined aircraft landing at an airfield and a party of men gathering to greet the pilot. When a very petite young woman clambered out the back, the men remained standing, refusing to believe that she could have flown such a mighty aircraft, or indeed any aircraft for that matter. Only after some time, and when no-one else emerged, did they finally believe she must have been at the controls.

In more recent times, a woman in the US recounts of her experience parking in a 'Veterans and Military' parking spot, getting out of her car, and a man confronting her and shouting: "That spot is for vets, ya know!" "I know," she replied. "It's nice to be appreciated! Women have been serving for decades!"

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Unconscious bias manifests itself in other ways that impact our daily lives. A study by two Dutch scientists at Maastricht University in 2015, for example, found that most offices set their thermostats based on the resting metabolic rate of a 40-year-old man. This is in accordance with standard indoor air conditioning guidelines which date back to the 1960s and which have never been updated. Because women tend to be smaller and have more body fat than men, however, they have slower metabolic rates. Which means the current air conditioning standards are too cold for most women.

Categories of bias

To be clear, unconscious bias is not limited to gender. It also impacts ethnicity and other visible diversity characteristics such as height, body weight and even names. It is triggered by our brains unconsciously making quick judgments and assessments that are influenced by our background and personal experiences, as well as our concept of societal stereotypes.

Typically, bias falls into different categories as such 'affinity bias' (this is a bias towards people we like and immediately identify with, and often manifests itself when recruiting and favouring a candidate that we see as the right 'fit' when actually we should value diversity and consider what the individual will bring to the team) and 'confirmation bias' (having perhaps decided to recruit an individual in our own image, we then seek to confirm we have made the right choice by looking for information that confirms our thinking and ignoring information that doesn't quite fit the narrative we have formed. This can of course lead to challenges later down the line if we choose to overlook an issue that subsequently becomes a problem.

To know more about different type of bias you can consult our Glossary.

Eliminating the bias by 'un-biasing' the processes

So in management, how can you address the issue of unconscious bias, and help yourself to make the right decisions for your colleagues, your business and yourself?

The key point is one of honesty and being honest with yourself, which is not always easy. We will all know of examples over the years where we may have had favourites or championed one individual over another. To address unconscious bias, it is essential to recognise and understand what biases you may have, because of your experience, your gender, your sexual orientation, and your own social background. Discussing the issue in an honest and open forum and raising the awareness of unconscious bias is the best way of starting to mitigate against it.

This will certainly help from a personal point of view, but it won't mean that bias will disappear. Indeed quite the opposite. Leaving the issue of bias to a myriad of individual considerations and preferences serves to fuel the subjectivity of decision-making, and in no way contributes to a structured process. The best way for this to be achieved, and create a more effective, sustainable solution, is to 'un-bias' the process.

This means that when hiring, promoting, assigning projects, or organizing the seating at a conference, an organization needs to have a proper process that is designed to be neutral, and takes into account how we all differ.



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Let me give you some examples:

- Use gender neutral language for job advertisements and for other communication: by doing this, you will attract more candidates/ encourage wider engagement.
- Make the application processes transparent. Remember that potential candidates also have their own bias and by having a clearer picture of the process they will realise they will not be excluded 'by default' – because of some aspect of diversity they embody – in the way that they thought.
- Require a gender balanced shortlist of candidates for hiring and for promotion: this will help safeguard meritocracy and will secure equity.
- Promote in groups: promoting in batches as opposed to announcing promotions on a one-by-one basis will make the gender balance more visible. It will make leaders more aware of the decisions they are taking and increase trust among the employees.
- Pay for performance, not for 'face time' presence: the pandemic has shown the latter was heavily overestimated and performance can be measured more objectively through relevant quantitative KPIs and qualitative parameters, rather than simply being 'seen' to be working.
- Show more diverse role models: it is a very powerful way to encourage everyone to lean in and to aspire to an interesting career in their organization.

The list could continue: there is so much that can be done that will help an organization in creating a more equitable workplace and a more effective one too. Being alive to unconscious bias will open a new world of opportunity to you and your business. It is not simply about ensuring you lay out the right furniture the next time you're hosting a conference or panel debate, but rather ensuring you enrich your organization with a more diverse team, with all of the benefits that brings.

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