

UNCONSCIOUS BIAS



FACTSHEET

Exploring the impact of unconscious bias in the workplace



The challenge for both individuals and businesses is becoming aware of which biases are constructive and generative and which are not.



Bias is a significant element of what makes us human. It can be considered as individual preference and the manner in which we navigate our daily existence. Our biases help us to make sense of the world in which we live - it's the way in which we quickly categorise what we see, feel, hear in order to make decisions about what these things mean. Without bias we would need to rationalise every thought or action rather than drawing on our experience and knowledge.

However, whilst bias can offer speed, efficiency and competence to our working practices, exerting our negative biases has the potential to exclude and appear prejudiced. Often this is unconscious, with people not being aware that hold biases. And this can impact relationships, working practices, and diversity and inclusion.

What is unconscious bias?

Conscious bias is something that we can articulate and deliver with rationale; consciously you can tell somebody what your bias is and why you have it.

Unconscious bias is when you have lost sight of the rationale or the process through which your biases manifest. It operates at a very subtle level and often there are big discrepancies between what people consciously believe their biases to be, and what their unconscious biases actually are.

Unconscious bias is demonstrated implicitly through emotion, communication, behaviour and relationships. It might be an almost unnoticeable behaviour, such as paying a little less attention to what someone says.

What is the impact of unconscious bias?

Whilst the positive benefits of bias offer speed, efficiency and inclusion; on the negative side bias can generate exclusion, narrow-mindedness and rigidity.

Take, for example, diversity and equality. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that in the UK women do not progress as quickly or as far as their male counterparts do, despite being entitled to all the same working rights. Why is this? Perhaps it's because men's CVs are viewed more favourably by employers than identical CVs submitted by female applicants, or perhaps women allow their own perceptions that barriers exist to affect their behaviours and the positions that they apply for.

Whatever the reasons, there are biases at play, and without being aware of this they will continue to negatively impact individuals and teams, stifling change and development.

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What is the solution?

Attempting to eliminate negative unconscious bias by simply identifying it can create a knee-jerk reaction. It can appear more as an indictment rather than progression. Helping people to recognise their unconscious biases and embark on a programme of change requires a supportive and developmental environment that has to be relevant to each individual. Bias is learned and



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therefore has a structure which means it can be reconsidered, relearned or dismissed; the critical factor in tackling negative bias is in understanding how it supports the individual who owns it.

Working with bias in a business context is firstly an exploration of the relationship between the internal experience (thinking, feeling, relations, values and beliefs) and how that translates into external behaviour and the development of relationships.

Any programme that attempts to deal with unconscious bias would need to include the following:

- Understanding the theory of unconscious bias from a number of perspectives such as nature/nurture or neurology.
- Participating in experiential exercises that challenge, inspire and create curiosity at a personal level and offer individuals the opportunity to question and contextualise what it is that motivates their choices.
- Creating tangible links between what individuals do, why they do it and how it is expressed.
- Working on real life challenges that individuals face every day.
- One-to-one coaching that allows for individuals to work on their own personal challenges and needs.
- Action planning that enables individuals to implement what they learn back in the workplace.

The benefits of exploring unconscious bias

- **Less conflict** - improved awareness of bias enables individuals to take a nonjudgemental look at how other individuals relate to their world. This results in better understanding of the reasons for people's behaviours and therefore better working relationships.
- **Greater equality and diversity** - if decision makers are aware of their own unconscious biases they will be more likely to make non-judgemental, objective decisions.
- **Improved performance** - if individuals are aware of their own unconscious biases about their ability or suitability for certain roles, they will be much less likely to allow their biases to put barriers in their way. This, coupled with better working relationships, could result in improved performance for individuals, teams and therefore the business as a whole.