Six Steps for Dealing With Unconscious Bias

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Raise your hand if you are biased.

If you were slow to raise your hand, you are not alone. Many of us are reluctant to admit we harbor some bias. We have been taught that to be biased means that we are bad. Or worse, that we are bigots and discriminators. But bias is a normal part of human behavior. It helps us survive by helping us make snap decisions that can save us from danger or protect our families and livelihoods. But it can also interfere with our desire to appreciate others and be fair to all. We all strive to be aware of the judgments we make about others. But it takes practice to question your gut instincts. Bias resides inside all of us, whether we like it or not.

New science and knowledge of organizational behavior reveals that most of the bias we may feel or exhibit exists in our unconscious. Much of that bias is cultural and is learned from our families of origin. We assume our own beliefs and norms are well…normal. We assume others share our perspective. Imagine inviting someone into your home. What if you told them “Make yourself at home,” and they went to the refrigerator and drank orange juice right from the carton? Clearly, we all have different worldviews and unique ways of navigating our environments!

Organizations that truly wish to create diverse employee populations and more inclusive workplaces have struggled for decades with overcoming bias. Clearly, individuals and groups should pay attention to how race, gender, sexual orientation, disability and multiple identities should be managed so that all employees can be successful, contributing members of their organizations. More times than not, people make choices that discriminate against one group and in favor of another, without even realizing that they are doing it. All of us need practice to reveal our thinking and understand not only what we think, but how we think.
Here are six “conscious” steps to help you deal with unconscious bias.

1. *Tell the Truth to Yourself & Notice What Influences Your Decisions*

Remember that *all* humans have unconscious preferences and biases, which is completely normal, and that those preferences and biases impact most, if not all, of the decisions we make, *including those regarding people*. Be willing to honestly admit your biases.

Also, keep in mind that unconscious preference and biases can influence decision-making in both negative as well as positive ways.

2. *Gather Data About Yourself*

The Implicit Association Test (*IAT*, [www.implicit.harvard.edu](http://www.implicit.harvard.edu)) can help you identify your unconscious preferences. Taking one or more of the IATs is a free, voluntary activity that you can do at home on your own computer. Keep track of your decisions and review them to see if there are any patterns that may not have been apparent to you (e.g., similarities in the persons you socialize with, people your hire or select to be on your team.) Patterns don’t automatically indicate bias. But if you see a pattern, it would be wise to examine it further.

3. *Stretch Your Comfort Zone*

If you discover that you view a particular group with discomfort, make a conscious effort to learn more about that group. Expose yourself to positive images and other information related to that group. Don’t be afraid to question yourself. If others question your decisions, instead of reacting defensively, try to listen to the feedback. Be open to change.

4. *Stimulate Your Curiosity about Others*

When you interact with a person who is part of a group with which you have had little interaction, be aware that you may be especially susceptible to stereotyping, which can lead to
false or negative assumptions about that person. Make a conscious effort to learn more about that individual as well as his/her group, recognizing that interaction with one person does not predict or explain his or her group norms.

5. **Expand Your Constellation of Input**

Get input from people representing other groups or points of view during your decision-making process. One of the best ways to bring concealed beliefs and how they affect behavior into clear view is to request peer feedback regarding potential preference patterns. Most of us are nervous to do this because we are inherently afraid of what we might hear. But are we better off with people thinking it and not telling us?

6. **If You Mess It Up, Clean It Up!**

Don’t be afraid to go to somebody and apologize if you feel like they have been treated unfairly, excluded because of who they are, or not recognized for what they contribute. Make the situation right and then evaluate the system that led to the decision and explore ways you can improve the process for the future.

Bias occurs because our fundamental way of encountering the world is driven by a hard-wired pattern of making unconscious decisions about others base on what feels safe, likeable, valuable, and competent. And that includes our reactions to the people we live with and work with every day. The pathway to overcoming bias begins by accepting the normalcy of it. When we accept that we have normal biases, it becomes much easier to observe how they may be impacting our decisions or reactions. Accepting personal biases makes them less, not more likely to impact others.

We are all human and so is bias. Engaging in these six steps is the first big step on a journey toward creating organizations where all people have their best shot at being successful.
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