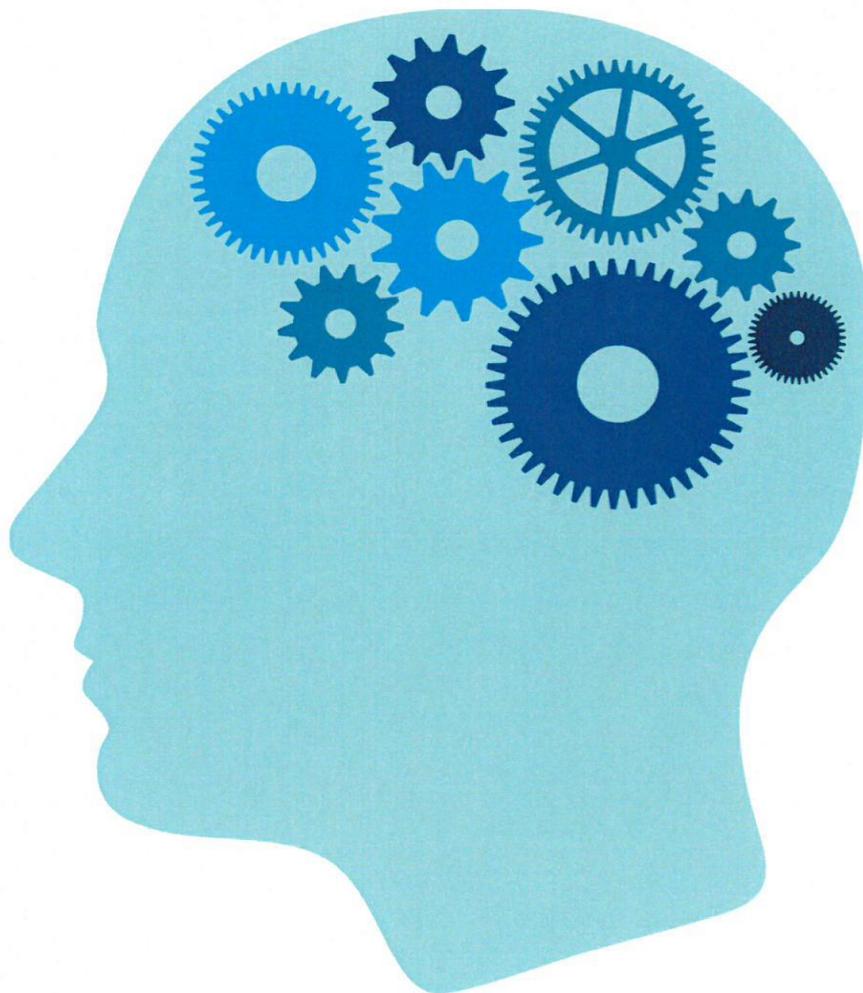


Managing Unconscious Bias

Practical Tips for Reducing Unconscious Bias



BUILDING INCLUSION GLOBALLY



Awareness and Action: Tips

The first step in unconscious bias reduction is being aware of what unconscious bias is and how it can affect others. This awareness begins to 'tip' our unconscious into the conscious where we can be completely aware of our bias and can begin to manage the bias and its effects.

This document will give you a brief reminder of what unconscious bias is, as well as some simple tips and techniques for reducing your unconscious bias and the associated micro-behaviours that may be affecting others.

Unconscious Bias: A Reminder

Unconscious bias is the term used to define the concept that individuals have preferences for objects and people at a subconscious level that unintentionally influence both behaviour and decision making.

As human beings we are continually processing vast amounts of information and to simplify this our brains categorise the world around us. This automatic processing enables us to know what to expect and how to react around certain objects. It also means we automatically categorise other human beings. This process was originally designed as a protection mechanism in early man, in order to rapidly identify our friends and enemies, but in today's complex society it can result in decisions and behaviours based on bias. It is completely normal, and something we all do, but there are things that we can do to lessen its effects.



Tip 1: Question and be curious

In order to reduce the effects of unconscious bias, it is important to question biases in yourself and to be curious and raise awareness in others.

Question Others

Below are some helpful tips on how to question unconscious bias in others and to help them to raise their awareness.

If a colleague or friend has made a statement that you feel has demonstrated their unconscious bias, it is important to remember they may not be aware of this bias. Aim to be supportive, rather than accusatory, and to encourage them to trace this thought or association.

Questioning others in this way lets you discuss unconscious assumptions and biases without directly mentioning the bias in question. As such you can help your colleague or friend to become curious about and question their own assumptions and change their thinking around the group or the person concerned.

Questioning Yourself

In the same way as questioning others, you can question your own unconscious assumptions and biases. If you notice yourself making an assumption without the evidence to support it, remember to ask yourself the following questions:

- Is this true?
- Is it always true?
- What evidence do I have?



Tip 2: Inclusive Meeting Practice

One of the ways that your unconscious bias can affect others is via micro-behaviours during meetings. In order to reduce the effects of unconscious bias in these situations, here are a few helpful tips to remember:

- Be aware of how you enter a meeting:
 - Acknowledge everybody at the meeting, not just the people you know
 - Be aware of the way you greet them – a smile and cheerful ‘hello’ is very different from a frown and a curt ‘hi’
- Value the time of others as much as you value your own
 - Arrive on time, and if you are late, apologise
 - Pay attention
 - Ensure you are prepared
- Do not always sit next to the same person at each meeting. If there is someone in the meeting you feel you may have a bias against, sit next to them
- Limit interruptions; this includes your BlackBerry/smartphone
 - The impact of micro-behaviours associated with the use of technology should not be underestimated – even if a device is being used under the table!
- Not everyone feels comfortable voicing their opinion at a meeting so look for non-verbal signs such as facial expressions – if someone looks like they don’t agree, ask
- If you disagree with someone else’s opinion, respond constructively rather than giving a negative response which may stop this person from voicing their opinion again.



Managing Meetings

If you are managing a meeting, you can play a significant role in reducing the effects of unconscious bias, both within the meeting and in its outcomes. Before your next meeting, try taking the steps below and see if the behaviours of those at the meeting, and the decisions they make, differ.

Before the meeting:

- Consider who you have consistently listened to in past meetings with the same group.
- Re-assess the meeting agenda; pre-plan who should lead each item
- Is there an individual who consistently sways the final decisions? What is it about this person that is so persuasive?
- Are there individuals that you are more comfortable being questioned by and those you are not?
- Ask a colleague to monitor your meeting behaviours; both in terms of the above points and resulting micro-behaviours.

During the meeting:

- Solicit the opinions of everyone at the meeting. Remember not to always draw upon the same people's opinion consistently but equally do not discount their opinion on this basis.
- Follow the meeting agenda; if the meeting raises topics for further consideration extend the meeting time or arrange another meeting.
- Ensure the final decision is balanced and is not influenced by the power a single individual may hold.
- Be open to challenges from all parties by asking for counter opinions and examples.

After the meeting:

- Book a time for feedback from your observational colleague. Work through their feedback objectively and take notes.
- Before your next meeting, re-read these notes considering how to incorporate the feedback.



Tip 3: Supportive Dialogue

We all have unconscious biases and can display micro-behaviours as a result of them. However, it can still be difficult to have and manage conversations about the giving or receiving of these micro-behaviours. This model of supportive dialogue takes you through 4 steps and supportive phrases that can be used to help you approach the subject and ensure a constructive outcome.

Acknowledge (feelings)

- “I understand you have a belief that a single mother will not be right for this role”

Clarify (avoid assumptions)

- “Am I missing something as I am still unclear as to how this has come about?”

Explore (evidence)

- “When you say, you feel clients would be unhappy, help me understand what you mean by that?”
-

Solve (moving forward)

- “What would a better situation look like for you?”

Based on the above model and by consciously practicing the following exercises, you can take the first steps towards supporting others to question bias.

Awareness and Action: Experiences

Behaviours may seem small and imperceptible but they can have enormous effects. Here are a few examples of how unconscious bias can feel in different situations and what can be done to reduce the effects:

Gender

Due to a crisis in the Singapore office, a manager must send a member of their team to resolve the issue that day. There are two candidates to choose from, both equally competent. They both have a spouse and two children and have both recently lost a parent. However, one candidate is male and the other is female. The manager decides to send the male on the basis that they have a wife who will look after the children and that they will be emotionally stronger than the female following the death of their parent. The manager does not seek the opinion of either of the team members.

What are the consequences?

- By not asking either party for their views, the manager would not be aware if, in light of their recent loss, the male chosen for the project did not feel emotionally robust enough to be away from his support system
- The female may not put herself forward for future travel due to a feeling that she will not be picked anyway
- It is highly likely that this will decrease the confidence of the female in question. A decrease in confidence can also have a number of effects including a decrease in quality of performance and therefore a decrease in selection for visible projects, leading to a vicious cycle.

What are the unconscious beliefs that led to this experience?

- Women are less emotionally stable than men
- Women will let their emotions impact their client relationships
- Women will let their emotions impact upon their decision-making ability
- Women with children do not want to travel/be away from their children
- Women with children must plan in advance/cannot travel at short notice
- By making this decision I am looking after the woman's best interest
- Men are willing to travel at short notice as they do not have the same commitments as women
- Men with spouses/long term partners are able to give more commitment to their job as their wife will look after the personal commitments.

How can I avoid these unconscious beliefs affecting my behaviour?

- Question your unconscious assumptions – see page 3
- Ask a colleague to evaluate your decisions
- If you know that an individual has personal challenges, make your decision purely on competency and experience then:
 - Talk to the individual
 - Talk to HR about any available resources to enable their participation.

What do I do if I have a similar experience?

- Remember that the manager did not make the decision out of malice and is more than likely unaware that any form of bias entered their decision making process
- Try to make them aware of their bias, using the model of questioning others provided on page 2-3.

Returning to Work/ Work Life Flexibility/Paternity Leave

“I have always wanted to be a hands on father and so when we recently adopted a baby girl, I took 3 months leave. Since returning to work I have been treated differently both by colleagues and managers. I haven’t received the same choice of projects, been included in the office repartee or socials and don’t feel that my opinion is solicited in the same way as before my leave. It’s as if, just because I prioritised my personal life, I am now seen as weak and unreliable without any consideration of my career up until this point.”

What are the consequences?

- The experience of this working father is likely to decrease his confidence and therefore performance
- His experience may also affect others considering a career break. Whilst this may mean they remain in the role, they unconsciously resent this decision resulting in a lesser commitment to the role
- These individuals may also leave to join an organisation where they will feel included on their return to work and if they choose to work flexibly. Not only will your organisation lose talent but it will also lose the investment they have made in this individual.

What are the unconscious beliefs that led to this experience?

- Taking a break from your career shows lack of commitment
- Males taking a career break are weak; it should be the females that look after children/take maternity leave
- After a career break, people do not perform as well as they have begun to forget their knowledge and skills
- People do not take one career break – taking one often leads to more.

How can I avoid these unconscious beliefs affecting my behaviour?

- Question your unconscious assumptions – see page 3
- Talk to the individual; ask them how they feel about returning to work, how you can help and what their goals are – this will help you understand their true position without making assumptions
- Consider how you would feel in their position – would these assumptions be true for you?

What do I do if I have a similar experience?

- Remember that the person demonstrating the bias did not make the decision out of malice and is more than likely unaware that any form of bias entered their decision making process
- Try to make them aware of their bias, using the model of questioning others provided on page 2-3.

Disability

“I recently attended an interview and it started off really well; I got a really good feeling from the interviewer and I think we really hit it off. I think I answered all the questions well but when he asked what the gap on my CV was, I explained that I was diagnosed with clinical depression a few years ago (my partner died and it took me a while to come to terms with it). All of a sudden things seemed to change. It’s nothing I could put my finger on, he didn’t say or do anything wrong but by the end of the interview I just knew he’d changed his mind about me and I hadn’t got the job.”

What are the consequences?

- The 'feeling' (picked up from micro-behaviours) that the candidate had most likely made him more nervous and therefore decreased his performance in the interview
- The interviewer may subconsciously look for aspects of the interview that can be used to reject the candidate
- Ultimately, the ideal candidate may be rejected on the basis of unconscious bias.

What are the unconscious beliefs that led to this experience?

- Someone who has had depression in the past is likely to take time off work again
- Depression infers a weakness that means they will not be as robust as other candidates
- A person that has had depression will be unenthusiastic and bring down the morale of the team.

How can I avoid these unconscious beliefs affecting my behaviour?

- Question your unconscious assumptions – see page 3
- Don't assume – ask. HR will be able to guide you as to what questions are appropriate to ask of a person with a disability. Many will be happy to answer your questions and dispel any unconscious assumptions you may have
- If you feel you may have a bias against a particular group, especially in an interview situation, ask a colleague to monitor your behaviour.

What do I do if I have a similar experience?

- Make the interviewer aware of how they have made you feel - see page 2-3
- If you are comfortable talking about your disability, whether visible or invisible, help others understand and dispel any unconscious assumptions.

Age

“I have a long-standing relationship with a client but recently before a pitch for updating the current contract my manager asked for a new strategy meeting. At the meeting he said he thought my colleague (who is much younger than me) should lead the pitch. I’m sure she’s very competent but she has no previous relationship with the client. When I asked why, he said he thought I was not as motivated as I used to be. He clearly thinks I’m heading for retirement, he may not have said as much but I can just tell that’s what he’s thinking!”

What are the consequences?

- By making a decision based on a feeling and without evidence, this individual’s motivation may *actually* decrease
- As a result the organisation may lose valuable input from an individual who has experience in this area and has built a solid relationship
- The individual may exit the organisation earlier than planned if they feel others perceive their value has decreased.

What are the unconscious beliefs that led to this experience?

- Older individuals are unmotivated
- Younger employees have more creative ideas and are more motivated
- Older individuals are unable to keep up with their clients’ needs
- Those nearing retirement have less commitment to the role.

How can I avoid these unconscious beliefs affecting my behaviour?

- Question your unconscious assumptions – see page 3
- If you feel one of your team members, no matter the age, is losing motivation – ask. It may be that there are other factors at play or that you have made an assumption
- Remember that your micro-behaviours may be displaying your unconscious thoughts without you realising and that they can have great effects including creating a ‘feeling’ of lack of support.

What do I do if I have a similar experience?

- Make the manager aware of how they have made you feel - see page 2-3
- Be conscious of the fact that they may not be aware of their micro-behaviours and there is no malice behind them.