

Unconscious Bias in the Workplace - April Department Connections

What is Unconscious Bias?

Unconscious bias refers to the mental shortcuts our brains take when processing information. These shortcuts are often based on stereotypes, leading us to make assumptions about others without realizing it.

Why Does It Matter?

Bias affects workplace interactions and decision-making, influencing:

- ✓ Teamwork & Communication
- ✓ Workplace Culture & Inclusion
- ✓ Trust & Psychological Safety

Common Types of Bias (with examples)

Affinity Bias – Favoring those similar to us. (E.g., Connecting more with coworkers who share your background.)

Confirmation Bias – Seeking information that supports our beliefs. (E.g., Assuming someone is disengaged because they're quiet.)

Halo/Horn Effect – Letting one trait overshadow everything else. (E.g., Thinking a friendly coworker is always competent.)

Attribution Bias – Making assumptions about behavior. (E.g., Thinking a late coworker is irresponsible, without knowing the reason.)

Conformity Bias – Following the group instead of speaking up. (E.g., Not questioning a biased decision because no one else does.)

Racial and Ethnic Bias – Making assumptions about individuals based on their race or ethnicity. (E.g., Assuming individuals from a particular ethnic group are naturally better or worse at certain skills or professions based on stereotypes.)

Age Bias – Favoring or discriminating against individuals based on age. (E.g., Assuming older employees are less tech-savvy or younger employees lack experience.)

How Can We Reduce Bias?

- ✓ Pause & Reflect – Ask yourself, “Am I making an assumption?”
- ✓ Frequently examine your words, actions and behaviour.
- ✓ Practice Mindfulness.
- ✓ Seek Other Perspectives – Get input from different viewpoints. Put yourself in the other persons shoes.
- ✓ Slow Down Decisions – Rely on facts, not impressions.
- ✓ Speak Up – Address bias in a constructive way.

Impact of Unconscious Bias in the Workplace

- Lower Employee Morale – Bias can create an unfair work environment where employees feel undervalued or overlooked.
- Decreased Productivity – Biased decision-making can result in missed opportunities for innovation and teamwork.
- Higher Turnover Rates – Employees who feel discriminated against or marginalized are more likely to leave the organization.

Discussion Questions

- ◆ Can you think of a time when unconscious bias may have influenced a workplace interaction?
- ◆ Has bringing these underlying thought patterns to light made you reflect on your own contributions to conflicts?
- ◆ How might bias contribute to feelings of exclusion or discomfort in the workplace?
- ◆ What’s one small habit you can adopt to challenge your own biases?
- ◆ How can we support each other in making our workplace more inclusive?

Self-Accountability

If someone comes to you or addresses how your actions have potentially harmed someone:

- Do not get defensive. It sucks, but we are being given a chance for connection
- Reflect on our action and discover how to challenge our own beliefs and assumptions
- Apologize to the person, let them know you have learned from this experience
- Move forward, with conscious effort to make more informed habits

Unconscious bias is an inevitable part of human nature, but by acknowledging, addressing it and being aware of our biases, we can foster a more inclusive, respectful, and psychologically safe workplace.

Final Activity

Activity

Mindfulness exercise where we get them to close their eyes, and I'll describe a scenario:

"You are sitting in your car at a red light downtown. You notice someone step out of a building and onto the sidewalk. As they walk toward a parked car, they stumble slightly and drop their keys. They pause for a moment before picking them up, then unlock their car and sit inside, staring forward for a while before doing anything else."

Now open your eyes.

Reflection Questions:

- Who did you picture?
 - What gender, age, or background did they have?
 - What were they wearing?
 - What assumptions did you make about this person?
 - Did you feel concerned? Judgmental? Did you relate to them?
 - If this was a different person (e.g., elderly vs. young, well-dressed vs. casual, different ethnicities), would your reaction change?