

Fighting the Bias in Your Brain

By Howard J. Ross



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Buried deep within our subconscious mind, all of us harbor biases that we consciously reject. These are not harmless thoughts that pop up periodically and get overruled by our reason. We act on these thoughts, often unwittingly. We all have bias that is beyond the reach of our normal range of awareness. This is unconscious or hidden bias.

People can be consciously committed to egalitarianism, and deliberately work to behave without prejudice, yet still possess hidden negative prejudices or stereotypes. When encountering a person for the first time, our brains automatically make note of detectable human differences. But, if we are hardwired to discriminate, are we doomed? The answer is a resounding no.

An awareness of unconscious bias allows and requires us to fundamentally rethink the way we approach leadership, training, and organizational policy and culture on a number of different levels. Organizations have focused a great deal of attention on trying to find ways for people, especially those in the dominant groups, to “get” diversity. The challenge is that “getting it,” on a conscious level, may have little or no impact on our unconscious beliefs and, more importantly, behavior. Our knowledge of unconscious bias makes several things abundantly clear:

- ◆ The limiting patterns of unconscious behavior are not restricted to any one group. All of us have them, and effective managers and business leaders particularly have to focus on our own assumptions and biases if we expect to have the moral authority to guide others in acknowledging and confronting theirs.
- ◆ A person who behaves in a non-exclusive or even discriminatory way does not have to be motivated by negative intent. When we approach people who view themselves as good individuals trying to do the right thing as if they “should have known better,” we are likely to be met with resistance. If we approach them with an assumption of innocence in intent, but with an emphasis on the impact of their behavior, we are more likely to reach them effectively and win their willing attention.
- ◆ Finally, we should not rely on any sense of subjective determinations of attitude, either individually or collectively, to determine whether our organizations are functioning in inclusive ways. Our conscious attitudes may have little to do with our success in producing results. We have to create objective measurements that give us individual and collective feedback on our performance if we are to create organizations that are truly inclusive.

The Pain and Cost of Unconscious Bias

One of the core drivers behind the work of diversity and inclusion professionals, almost since the inception of the first corporate diversity efforts, has been to find the “bad people” and fix them; to eradicate bias. There is good reason for this. If we are going to create a just and equitable society, and if we are going to create organizations in which everybody can have access to their fair measure of success, it clearly is not consistent for some people to be discriminated against based on their identification with a particular group. Also, clear examples of conscious bias and discrimination still exist, whether in broader societal examples or more specific organizational examples.

The problem with the good person/bad person paradigm is two-fold: it virtually assures that both on a collective and individual basis we will never “do diversity right” because every human being has bias of one kind or another. Secondly, it demonstrates a lack of understanding of a reality: human beings, at some level, need bias to survive. So, are we biased? Of course. Virtually every one of us is biased toward something, somebody, or some group.

Implicit biases grow out of normal and adaptive features of human thinking. Our very survival at one time depended upon our adaptive tendency to categorize, to form groups and to absorb subtle social messages and cues. Navigating a complex world requires us to make sense of the environment around us.

The problem arises when we form associations that contradict our intentions, beliefs and values. That is, many people unwittingly associate “female” with “weak,” “Arab” with “terrorist,” or “black” with “criminal,” even though such stereotypes undermine shared values such as fairness and equality.

The Deep Impact of Unconscious Bias in the Workplace

Unconscious bias has been shown to impact whether hiring officers choose the most qualified candidate for a job. If we are unaware of our biases can we give an employee a fair performance review? Or hire the right CEO? Where diversity is concerned, unconscious bias creates hundreds of seemingly irrational circumstances every day in which people make choices that seem to make no sense and be driven only by overt prejudice, even when they are not. Of course, there are still some cases where people are consciously hateful, hurtful, and biased. These people still need to be watched for and addressed. But it is important to recognize that the concept of unconscious bias does not only apply to “them.” It applies to all of us. Each one of us has some groups with which we consciously feel uncomfortable, even as we castigate others for feeling uncomfortable with our own groups.

How to Deal With Unconscious Bias in the Workplace ... For Better or For Worse

There are a number of strategies that will help us create workplace cultures in which employees can actively “unconceal” perceptions and patterns that have been hidden.

- ◆ Recognize that as human beings, our brains make mistakes without us even knowing it. The new science of “unconscious bias” applies to how we perceive other people. We’re all biased and becoming aware of our own biases will help us mitigate them in the workplace.
- ◆ Reframe the conversation to focus on fair treatment and respect, and away from discrimination and “protected classes”. Review every aspect of the employment life cycle for hidden bias – screening resumes, interviews, onboarding, assignment process, mentoring programs, performance evaluation, identifying high performers, promotion and termination.
- ◆ Ensure that anonymous employee surveys are conducted company-wide to first understand what specific issues of hidden bias and unfairness might exist at your workplace. Each department or location may have different issues.

- ◆ Conduct anonymous surveys with former employees to understand what were the issues they faced, what steps could be taken for them to consider coming back, whether they encourage or discourage prospective employees from applying for positions at your company and whether they encourage or discourage prospective customers/clients from using your company's products or services.
- ◆ Offer customized training based upon survey results of current and former employees that includes examples of hidden bias, forms of unfairness that are hurtful and demotivating, and positive methods to discuss these issues...
- ◆ Offer an anonymous, third-party complaint channel such as an ombudsperson; since most of the behaviors that employees perceive as unfair are not covered by current laws—e.g. bullying, very subtle bias—existing formal complaint channels simply don't work.
- ◆ Initiate a resume study within your industry, company and/or department to see whether resumes with roughly equivalent education and experience are weighted equally, when the names are obviously gender or race or culturally distinct.
- ◆ Launch a resume study within your company and/or department to reassign points based on earned accomplishments vs. accidents of birth—e.g. take points off for someone who had an unpaid internship, add points for someone who put him/herself through college.
- ◆ Support projects that encourage positive images of persons of color, GLBT and women. Distribute stories and pictures widely that portray stereotype-busting images—posters, newsletters, annual reports, speaker series, podcasts. Many studies show that the mere positive image of specific groups of people can combat our hidden bias.
- ◆ Identify, support and collaborate with effective programs that increase diversity in the pipeline. Reward employees who volunteer with these groups, create internships and other bridges, and celebrate the stories of those who successfully overcome obstacles.

The Organizational Unconscious

Unconscious behavior is not just individual; it influences organizational culture as well. This explains why so often our best attempts at creating corporate culture change with diversity efforts seem to fall frustratingly short; to not deliver on the promise they intended.

Organizational culture is more or less an enduring collection of basic assumptions and ways of interpreting things that a given organization has invented, discovered, or developed in learning to cope with its internal and external influences. Unconscious organizational patterns, or “norms” of behavior, exert an enormous influence over organizational decisions, choices, and behaviors. These deep-seated company characteristics often are the reason that our efforts to change organizational behavior fail. Despite our best conscious efforts, the “organizational unconscious” perpetuates the status quo and keeps old patterns, values, and behavioral norms firmly rooted.

Five Simple Steps to Address and Reduce Unconscious Bias

Step One: Admit biases are learned early and are counter to our commitment to fair and just treatment. Point out subtle stereotypes used by peers and in the media. Surround yourself with tools and cues that help remind yourself and others that equality matters and is hard work to achieve. If people are aware of their hidden biases, they can monitor and attempt to ameliorate hidden attitudes before they are expressed through behavior. This compensation can include attention to language, body language and to the stigmatization felt by target groups.

Step Two: Create environments where different views are welcomed. Think positively, particularly about people of whom you have previously been critical. Ask yourself: Is your negative view based on anything deeper than their overt behavior? Are you misreading their behavior or attitude?

Step Three: Build integrated teams. Create policies and cultures that require colleagues to treat one another with courtesy and professionalism. By including members of other groups in a task, people begin to think of themselves as part of a larger community in which everyone has skills and can contribute. Such experiences have been shown to improve attitudes across racial and cultural lines and between people old and young.

Step Four: Use your imagination. There is evidence that unconscious attitudes, contrary to initial expectations, may be malleable. For example, imagining strong women leaders or seeing positive role models of African Americans has been shown to, at least temporarily, change unconscious biases. Using your imagination to create and frame a positive outcome can assist you in uncovering new possibilities for progress.

Step Five: Volunteer together. When people work together in a structured environment to solve shared problems through community service, their attitudes about diversity can change dramatically.

An understanding of unconscious bias is an invitation to a new level of engagement about diversity issues. It requires awareness, introspection, authenticity, humility, and compassion. And most of all, it requires communication and a willingness to act.

Conclusion

Unconscious patterns have an enormous impact on both our individual behavior and on organizational behavior. Only when we find the courage and curiosity to engage in a seemingly contradictory path—consciously becoming aware of and addressing something that is, by nature, concealed—can we begin to see more clearly into our leadership blind spots. Awareness and improvement does not happen overnight. Increasing our diversity, inclusiveness and cultural competency require us to undertake a long journey of continuously challenging our perceptions and slowing down our impulse to judge instantaneously and reactively. Ultimately, the result will be greater opportunity for all with more engaged individuals and more profitable organizations.

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