

Understanding Unconscious Bias

Definition

Snap judgements we make about people and situations based upon years of subconscious socialization.

Implicit Versus Explicit Bias

According to Mahzarin Banaji, the human brain is hard-wired to make quick decisions that draw on a variety of assumptions and experiences without us even knowing it is doing so, meaning that our unconscious predispositions can influence our decision making.

Implicit biases are not deliberately or consciously created, but rather “they are products of our brain’s definition of normal, acceptable or positive, and they are shaped by many factors — from past experiences to our cultural environment to the influence of our social community and media around us”.

Explicit Bias

- Attitudes and beliefs, we have that we are fully aware of based on what’s being perceived. Explicit biases are usually directed toward a group of people.

Unconscious | Implicit Bias

- Unintended, subtle, and subconscious associations learned through past experiences.
- Thoughts that happen to all of us, that we are unaware of on a conscious level.

System 1 & 2 Thinking

Daniel Kahneman won the Nobel prize for his work with Amos Tversky on how intuition works. In his book, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, he describes the two systems that our brain uses for making decisions as Systems 1 and Systems 2.

System 1: Intuitive Thinking

- Unconscious, automatic, emotional, fast, effortless

System 2: Rational Thinking

- Conscious, deliberate, systematic, slow and effortful

Common Workplace Biases

Affinity bias - The tendency to gravitate toward people similar to ourselves. That might mean hiring or promoting someone who shares the same race, gender, age, or educational background.

Attribution bias – The tendency to attribute our own successes to our skills and talents and our failures to things outside of our control. Yet, when it comes to other people, there is a tendency to think the opposite. If someone else has done something well, we consider them lucky, and if they’ve done something badly, we tend to think it’s due to their personality or bad behavior.

Confirmation bias - The tendency to look for pieces of information that support our pre-existing views and ignore data that contradicts our views. When we succumb to it, early interactions and experiences of others can go on to influence our lasting, long-term feelings towards them, regardless of their current actions or performance.



Common Workplace Biases Continued

Cultural bias - When we stereotype individuals based on their country of origin, religion, or ethnic background without actually looking into their skills or performance levels. Cultural bias involves a prejudice or highlighted distinction in viewpoint that suggests a preference of one culture over another and can be described as discriminative.

Halo Effect - The tendency to draw a general impression about an individual on the basis of a single characteristic. This could look like putting someone on a pedestal or thinking more highly of them after learning something impressive about them.

Horns Effect - The tendency to see one bad thing about a person and form a complete view of them based on that single negative attribute, letting it cloud our opinions of all of their other attributes. It is the direct opposite of the halo effect.

Strategies to Managing Bias

Question your first impressions

Prompts or questions that encourage us to examine our assumptions when assessing others, or making decisions that will impact their careers, helps bring our biases into conscious awareness. When engaged in high-stakes decision-making about others, always stop to ask yourself the following questions:

- Does this person remind me of myself?
- Does this person remind me of anyone else? Is this positive or negative?
- Are there things about this person that particularly influence my impression? Are they really relevant to the job?
- What assessments have I already made about this person? Are these grounded in solid information or in my assumptions?

After answering these questions, step back, pay attention to objective information, and seek evidence that contradicts your initial assessment.

Justify decisions

Justify your decisions to yourself and others by reflecting on the following prompts and sharing your responses with others.

- What were the key variables in making this decision? Why were these important?
- What data did you use? If you didn't consider certain data relevant, why not?
- What input and/or feedback did you collect from others?
- Why do you ultimately believe this is the decision will lead to the best outcome?

Ask for feedback

- Ask your peers, leaders, and direct reports for feedback by regularly asking questions such as:
- What have I missed?
- What am I not seeing?
- Where might bias be influencing my perspective?
- What influences may be in my blind spot?

