

An introduction to...

Unconscious bias



This course is a 5min read
with additional time required
for exercises

How are you hardwired? Becoming aware of your unconscious bias traps

Most of us believe that we're ethical and unbiased. We often believe that our attitudes are neutral and we do not make judgements based on stereotypes. We believe these points don't affect our everyday decisions and outlook of other people. However, more than two decades of research confirms the opposite – bias is part of human nature. Even nice people have biases!

Unconscious bias is not a blame game. We all do it, and none of us can avoid it. So what are we supposed to do about it? The key is to **recognise, reflect, and rebalance**.

What cultural rules, values, behaviours and traditions did you learn growing up? How have these shaped you? These are useful starting points for uncovering our biases.

Where do biases come from?

- Messages we receive as we grow & upbringing
- Early experiences
- Family
- Peers
- Religion/lack of
- Media
- Societal norms

What are the most common unconscious biases?

- **Confirmation Bias** – searching for evidence to back up first impressions
- **Attribution Bias** – how we perceive others' actions
- **Beauty Bias** – judging people based on looks
- **Affinity Bias** – working/associating with people like ourselves
- **Conformity Bias** – changing opinions to conform with the group
- **Halo Effect** – perceived as having more positive traits than others
- **Horns Effect** – negative assumptions clouding our judgement

1. How does unconscious bias affect me?

Think about the decisions you make everyday about others. Look back at the list of common biases – have any applied to your interactions with others recently?

The effects of bias are often so subtle that they can be barely noticeable – maybe all your closest work colleagues have similar backgrounds to you (affinity) or you started using your hands more when you talk with certain people that do this too (conformity). Bias very often results in the development of micro-behaviours.

You're not alone. Everyone has biases and takes them into the workplace – they are simply mental shortcuts based on social norms and stereotypes. Mental grouping is part of the survival mechanism hardwired into our brains. However, just because it's natural to us doesn't mean it isn't harmful, and our small actions can contribute to societal perpetuations of bias.

2. What's the harm caused?

One of the everyday ways we might cause harm through unconscious bias is through microaggressions. These are verbal, behavioural, and/or environmental actions, whether intentional or not, that communicate hostility, derogatory or negative slights or insults.

Microaggressions are typically targeted towards minority groups, such as those based on race, gender, sexual orientation or religion. They may be brief but can also happen frequently, even becoming commonplace in some circumstances. "Oh wow, you don't look like a [specific minority group]" or "your name is difficult to pronounce" might have been innocently intended but added no value to the recipient, other than making them feel more excluded.

Microaggressions have a seriously negative impact on creating an inclusive environment.

3. The big impact of the little things

The little assumptions, stereotypes and prejudices can have a huge impact on us and other people's lives.

For example, these behaviours can lead to people's mental health and wellbeing being compromised. Their potential might not be realised as a result, and they might even lose careers and other opportunities.

These behaviours aren't just detrimental for targets of unconscious bias – **society and organisations themselves will miss out on diverse-thinking innovation**. Whilst little actions might seem unimportant, they ultimately contribute to perpetuating wider stereotypes and inequalities, which can be extremely harmful.

Did you know

Gender neutral jobs fill faster

A good example of unconscious bias in the recruiting process is hidden gender bias. It's not always obvious or intuitive, but the impact it has on your candidate pipeline is clear. Imagine reading a job advert with the words 'ambitious', 'challenge', 'analytics', and 'independently'. These are pretty masculine coded words, as opposed to feminine coded words like 'support', 'responsible', 'understanding', and 'responsive'.

That's why it's necessary to have gender-neutral jobs – they not only draw a broader applicant pool, but they also fill three weeks faster on average than jobs biased at either end of the spectrum.

One useful tool to use to gender decode job adverts is [Textio](#). It uses data science to reveal the hidden gender bias in your writing, and suggests alternatives so you can recruit from the widest possible pool of qualified candidates. After all, you can't hire the people who choose not to apply.

Top tip

A Road Map to Success

Once you've recognised your unconscious biases, it doesn't just stop there. After that, it's important to do your own **personal work**. Explore values, beliefs, and attitudes about others, and try making connections with others that **don't look like you** – get out of your echo chamber of biases.

Recognise the contexts when your biases may be most active. Keep a watch on your micro-behaviours and try to rebalance them. Even if you don't recognise it immediately, start with the assumption that biases are at play. **Pause, reflect, think, then act.**

It might also be worth investigating whether your current recruiting / hiring practices and policies ensure diverse staffing and representative leadership. In parallel, keep your entire organisation and the larger community engaged in positive self-reflection!

Remember – don't beat yourself up about it! This isn't about feeling guilty, it's about becoming aware. Most importantly, it's about using that awareness to help eliminate negative biases.



This activity
takes 15min

Activity: Test your awareness – how your intuition deceives you

Watch this [film](#)

Follow the instructions on the video to test how your own intuition might deceive you.

Next, have a go at answering these questions:

- Have you ever experienced someone making an assumption about you?
- What do you think the assumption was based on? Was it accurate?
- Can you think of any examples of stereotyping you have encountered, either professionally or personally?
- Is there such a thing as a positive stereotype?
- What have been the major influences on how you feel and think about difference?

Further resources

- [Lean In Video Series on Gender Unconscious Bias](#)
- [Film about implicit biases](#)
- 'Blink' by Malcolm Gladwell
- 'Our Racist Heart' by Geoffrey Beattie
- 'Blind Spot: Hidden Biases of Good People' by Mahzarin Banaji and Anthony Greenwald
- 'The Hidden Brain' by Shankar Vedantam
- Take the [Implicit bias test / Implicit Association Test](#)
 - The online Implicit Association Test, a result of collaboration among psychologists from Harvard, the University of Virginia, and the University of Washington, was designed to help test takers assess their unconscious biases. Since it was launched in 1998, more than 6 million people have taken the test. The test assesses bias based on how quickly the test taker pairs a face with a positive term and then compares it to how quickly the test taker responds to more difficult terms. There are 14 test modules in all.