

YOU? YEAH, YOU'RE BIASED. NEGOTIATING AND OVERCOMING THE UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

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Introduction

It feels like everywhere you turn these days people are talking about implicit or unconscious biases. I brief understanding of what these terms mean and the impact they can have in the workplace (as well as your own personal life) makes it clear why everyone is talking about them.

In its simplest form, unconscious biases are social stereotypes about certain groups of people that individuals form outside their conscious awareness. Unconscious bias happens outside of our control; it occurs automatically and is triggered by our brain making a quick judgment. If left unchecked, unconscious bias can thrive in all facets of an organization and may even end up shaping the culture of your organization in detrimental ways. This article is intended to provide an overview of the most common unconscious biases, as well as provide some tips for recognizing the biases and working to counter their influence over the people you work with.

Before going any further, it is important to note that everyone has biases. Having biases does not make you a bad person or unethical; it makes you human. Instead of spending time attempting to “stop” having these biases, your time is better spent (!) understanding you have them; and, (2) working to become aware of when you are experiencing these types of biases in hopes of lessen the negative impact they may have.

Impact of Bias on Workplace

Before we even dive into the different types of biases and how to recognize and deal with them, we need to understand why it is worth our efforts. This part might be the easiest to explain. If we were to let our biases remain unchecked, we will end up surrounded by people just like us. Life without diversity lacks creative thinking and innovation. By working alongside people of different backgrounds, experiences and working styles, creative concepts can be born from bouncing ideas off each other and offering feedback and suggestions. Whereas one person may be great at generating exciting, out of the box ideas, another individual may have the necessary experience to execute it; so, it is essential to play on each individual’s strengths and collaborate with others in the team. However, we need to be clear that diversity does not equal inclusiveness. The buck does not just stop once an organization is diverse. It must go the step further to create a sense of belonging for all employees.

Types of Unconscious Biases

Depending on which article or book you read, there are anywhere between four and ten types of unconscious biases that have been shown to impact the workplace. This article will only focus on the four we have found to be most prevalent: (1) affinity bias; (2) confirmation bias; (3) halo effect; and, (4) attribution bias.

AFFINITY BIAS

Affinity bias is the unconscious tendency to get along with others who are like you or who share similar qualities with you or someone you like. The main reason one has an affinity bias is because it is simply easier; easier to choose to interact with people who are like you because it is comfortable, conversations are effortless. However, affinity biases can have negative consequences in the workplace. Take the following as an example: an employee interviews two candidates—one is like the interviewer (a 40-year-old male with two teenagers) and the other is very different (she is a 30-year-old single female with no children). The interviewer found he has more in common

with the other male and makes him an offer. One month later, the new male employee must fill a vacancy on his team and again hires someone just like him. Before you know it, the company has built a team of all like-minded people and there is zero diversity. As explained below, an organization without diversity is a recipe for failure.

CONFIRMATION BIAS

Confirmation bias is a type of bias where people seek information that confirms pre-existing beliefs or assumptions. Confirmation bias is a little different than other biases, as it does not directly involve biases for or against people. Instead, it is a bias towards or against certain facts or information. According to Howard J. Ross, author of *Everyday Bias*, confirmation bias is “the tendency for people to gather information or respond to a circumstance in a way that confirms already established beliefs.”¹ In other words, when we act with confirmation bias, we accept information that confirms what we believe and reject information that conflicts with our established beliefs. Some experts call confirmation bias “wishful thinking” because people prefer facts that prove what they wish to be true.² For example, imagine someone believes left-handed people are more creative than right-handed people. Whenever this person encounters a person who is both left-handed and creative, they place greater importance on this “evidence” that supports what they already believe. This individual might even seek “proof” that further backs up this belief while discounting examples that don’t support the idea.

Confirmation biases not only impact how we gather information, but also influence how we interpret and recall information. People who support or oppose a particular issue will not only seek information to support their position, they will interpret any information received (i.e., newspaper articles, social media posts, television or radio shows) in a way that upholds their existing ideas. Further, people will only remember details from the information received that reinforces their previous beliefs and attitudes.

Here is a good example of confirmation biases in action: Consider the debate over climate change. Let’s say I believe climate change is real and is a big concern. I will seek out new articles that reaffirm the need for restrictions on emissions and other things that lead to global warming. When I hear stories about climate change, I only hear what confirms my existing beliefs. However, my friend Joe does not believe in climate control and does not believe it is a threat. He also seeks out news articles that are aligned with his position and interprets stories in a way that align with his current position. Both Joe and I have very different opinions on the same subject and our interpretations are based on our own existing beliefs. Even if we read the same story, our bias tends to shape the way we perceive the details, further confirming our original beliefs.

According to DeEtta Jones, a leader in diversity and inclusion training, confirmation biases can have a very harmful and significant impact on an organization. Unconscious biases can lead to people within your organization refusing to believe information that conflicts with their own prejudices. An example she refers to often in her work is as follows:

A supervisor being reluctant to hire an African American due to his own implicit biases. If he hires an African American who performs poorly, that would confirm his beliefs. Worse, he might allow this experience to justify his refusal to hire other

¹ Jones, DeEtta. “Home.” DeEtta Jones & Associates, 21 Nov. 2018, <https://deettajones.com/confirmation-bias-hurts-organizations/>.

² *Id.*

African Americans. Ironically, because of the way confirmation bias works, hiring a successful African American employee could have the same result. In order to justify a continued refusal to hire African American employees, the supervisor would need to believe that his hire was “one of the good ones.” In other words, where confirmation bias exists, there may be exceptions to the rules, but the rules themselves remain unchanged.³

Confirmation bias can appear in other areas as well, especially employee reviews. According to research published in the *Harvard Business Review*, confirmation biases often cause bosses to give female employees worse reviews than their male peers.⁴ The article noted that the subjective nature of reviews allows confirmation biases to slip into the process and double standards to flourish. In the research, bosses used negative terms to describe women, but used positive language to describe the same behavior in men.⁵ In other words, when the supervisors evaluated the women, they only saw what they wanted to see.

HALO EFFECT

The “halo effect” is the tendency for positive impressions of a person, company, brand or product in one area to positively influence one’s opinion or feelings in other areas. Easier put, this bias occurs when your overall impression of a person impacts your evaluation of that person’s specific traits. For example, you are attending a conference and one of the presenters is very well-spoken. You automatically believe that same speaker is smart, driven and successful.

There are several ways the halo effect can influence perceptions of others in work settings. For example, experts suggest that the halo effect is one of the most common biases affecting performance appraisals and reviews. Supervisors may rate subordinates based on the perception of a single characteristic rather than the whole of their performance and contribution. For example, a worker’s enthusiasm or positive attitude may overshadow their lack of knowledge or skill, causing co-workers to rate them more highly than their actual performance justifies.

The halo effect can also have an impact on income. A study published in the *Journal of Economic Psychology* found that, on average, attractive food servers earn approximately \$1,200 more per year in tips than their unattractive counterparts.⁶ Another study found that physical attractiveness has a positive effect not only on an individual’s self-confidence but also on their overall income and financial well-being.⁷

³ Jones, DeEtta. “Confirmation Bias: How it Hurts Your Organization.” *DeEtta Jones & Associates*, 21 Nov. 2018, <https://deettajones.com/confirmation-bias-hurts-organizations/>.

⁴ Cecchi-Dimeglio, Paola. “How Gender Bias Corrupts Performance Reviews, and What to Do About It.” *Harvard Business Review*, 19 Nov. 2018, <https://hbr.org/2017/04/how-gender-bias-corrupts-performance-reviews-and-what-to-do-about-it>.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Parrett, M. Beauty and the feast: Examining the effect of beauty on earnings using restaurant tipping data. *Journal of Economic Psychology*. 2015;49:34-46. doi:10.1016/j.joep.2015.04.002

⁷ Judge, TA, Hurst, C, and Simon, LS. Does it pay to be smart, attractive, or confident (or all three)? Relationships among general mental ability, physical attractiveness, core self-evaluations and income. *Journal of Applied Psychology*. 2009;94(3):742-755. doi:10.1037/a0015497

ATTRIBUTION BIAS

Attribution bias is the tendency to have different rationale for your own behavior versus that of others. When talking about attribution biases, many scholars focus on something called the fundamental attribution error. This is our tendency to attribute another's actions to their character, while attributing our own behavior to external situational factors. Take the following as an example: one of your "disorganized" employees was late to a meeting. That same day, you are late to a different meeting, but proceed to make an excuse for your tardiness. You have cut yourself a break, while holding others 100% accountable for their actions.

As one Harvard Business School article put it, the fundamental attribution error exists because of the way in which we perceive the world. While we have at least some idea of our own character, motivations, and the situational factors affecting us day-to-day, we rarely know all of the things going on with someone else.⁸ In working with our colleagues, for example, we form a general impression of their character based on pieces of situations, but never see the whole picture. While it would be nice to give them the benefit of the doubt, our brains use limited information to make judgments. And thus, "we only have their perceived character available to us to chastise them for being tardy to the big corporate strategy review."⁹

This bias can have devastating impacts on an organization. As the Harvard Business School found:

Within organizations, fundamental attribution error causes everything from arguments to firings and ruptures in organizational culture. In fact, it's at the root of any misunderstanding in which human motivations have the potential to be misinterpreted. Think of the last time you thought a coworker should be fired or the last time a customer service representative was incompetent. How often have you really tried to understand the situational factors that could be affecting this person's work? Probably not much. FAE is so prevalent because it's rooted in psychology, so completely overcoming it is impossible.¹⁰

Mr. Healy goes on to say that not all hope is lost. In his research, he has found gratitude is helpful in combating this bias. As he sees it, when you become resentful at someone for a bad "quality" they demonstrate, try to make a list of five positive qualities the person also has—this will help balance out your perspective. Another method is to practice becoming more "emotionally intelligent" (i.e., practicing self-awareness, empathy, self-regulation and other methods of becoming more objective in the service of one's long-term interests and the interests of others). Practicing empathy such as having discussions with coworkers about their opinions on projects and life out of the office, is a good first step.

⁸ Patrick Healy, The Fundamental Attribution Error: How it Affects your Organization and How to Overcome It (June 8, 2017), <https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/the-fundamental-attribution-error>

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

Ways to Overcome Biases

Unfortunately, it is impossible to eliminate any of these biases. Instead, we will focus on ways to avoid them having a large negative impact on your work and personal lives. The good news is that by reading this article and becoming aware of the different types of biases, you are well on your way to overcoming their negative impacts when they arise.

AWARENESS

Awareness is key. Overriding stereotypes takes a conscious act of will, whereas the activation of stereotypes does not because they are often embedded in your unconscious mind. According to Kathleen Nalty, a lawyer and consultant who focuses on diversity and inclusion, there are two easy ways to develop awareness of your unconscious biases:

1. Keep track of your surprises (i.e., instances when something you expected turned out to be quite different). Those surprises offer a window into your unconscious. For example, when you pass a slow-moving car impeding the flow of traffic, do you expect to see a very elderly driver behind the wheel? When you see that the driver is actually younger, does that surprise you? You may truly believe you are not consciously biased against the elderly, but you reflexively presumed that the slower driver was elderly. That is a product of unconscious bias. How could that attitude influence decision-making in other areas, such as in interactions with more senior colleagues, witnesses, jurors, or clients?
2. Take a free, anonymous implicit association test (IAT) online at implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/selectatest.html. This series of tests, sponsored by Harvard University and taken by millions of people since the late 1990s, can reveal areas where you unknowingly harbor unconscious biases. There are over a dozen different tests, measuring unconscious bias with respect to disability, race, age, gender, gender roles, mental health, weight, sexual orientation, religion, and more. The tests measure how quickly or slowly you associate positive or negative words with different concepts. Your unconscious, immediate assumptions reveal themselves in the delayed responses measured by the computer when you struggle to connect words and concepts that are not as readily associated. You might not like, or be in denial with respect to, some of the test results, but they can be useful in revealing often uncomfortable truths about what your unconscious mind is up to.¹¹

¹¹ Kathleen Nalty, *Strategies for Confronting Unconscious Bias*, 45 COLO. LAW. 45 (2016).

BEHAVIORAL CHANGES

In addition to being aware of your biases, you need to find a way to interrupt them. As better explained by Ms. Nalty, “behavior changes are also essential.” Like correcting a bad habit, “you can retrain yourself to think in less biased and stereotyped ways,” but you must be motivated to make a change. Here are a few strategies Ms. Nalty has found are best to change behaviors that lead to unconscious biases:

- **Retrain your brain.** “The ‘holy grail’ of overcoming implicit bias is to change the underlying associations that form the basis of implicit bias.” To do so, you need to develop the ability to be self-observant. Pay attention to your thinking, assumptions, and behaviors and then acknowledge, dissect, and alter automatic responses to break the underlying associations.
- **Actively doubt your objectivity.** Take the time to review your decisions (especially those related to people and their careers) and search for indicia of bias; audit your decisions to ensure they don’t disparately impact people in other groups. Pause before you make a final decision. Question your assumptions and first impressions.
- **Ask others for feedback to check your thought processes.** Ask yourself if your decision would be different if it involved a person from a different social identity group. Finally, justify your decision by writing down the reasons for it. This will promote accountability, which can help make unconscious attitudes more visible.
- **Be mindful of snap judgments.** Take notice every time you jump to conclusions about a person belonging to a different social identity group (like the slow driver). Have a conversation with yourself about why you are making judgments or resorting to stereotypes. Then resolve to change your attitudes.
- **Oppose your stereotyped thinking.** One of the best techniques seems odd but has been shown to have a lasting effect: think of a stereotype and say the word “no” and then think of a counter-stereotype and say “yes.” People who do this have greater long-term success in interrupting their unconscious bias with respect to that stereotype. To decrease your implicit biases, you might also want to limit your exposure to stereotyped images; for instance, consider changing the channel if a TV show or song features stereotypes.
- **Deliberately expose yourself to counter-stereotypical models and images.** For example, if it is easier for you to think of leaders as male, study successful female leaders to retrain your unconscious to make the connection between leaders and both women and men. Research has shown that simply viewing photos of women leaders helps reduce implicit gender bias. Even the Harvard professor who invented the IAT—Mahzarin Banaji—acknowledged that she has some gender bias. To interrupt it, she put rotating photographs on her computer screensaver that are counter-stereotypical, including one depicting a female construction worker feeding her baby during a work break.
- **Look for counter-stereotypes.** Similarly, pay more attention and be more consciously aware of individuals in counter-stereotypic roles (e.g., male nurses, female airline pilots, athletes with disabilities, and stay-at-home dads). Remind yourself that you have unconscious bias. Research shows that people who think they are unbiased are actually more biased than those who acknowledge they have biases. There is a Skill Pill mobile app on managing unconscious bias available for enterprise usage (skillpill.com). If you

play this short app before engaging in hiring, evaluation, and promotion decisions, it could help you interrupt any unconscious biases. But you don't need an app to prompt yourself to be mindful of implicit bias and its impact. You could create a one-page reminder sheet that accompanies every evaluation form or candidate's résumé, for instance.

- **Engage in mindfulness exercises on a regular basis, or at least before participating in an activity that might trigger stereotypes (e.g., interviewing a job candidate).** Research shows that mindfulness breaks the link between past experience and impulsive responses, which can reduce implicit bias. Engage in cross-difference relationships. Cultivate work relationships (or personal relationships outside of work) that involve people with different social identities. This forces you out of your comfort zone and allows your unconscious to become more comfortable with people who are different. Those new relationships will also force you to dismantle stereotypes and create new types of thinking—both conscious and unconscious. So, find ways to mentor junior colleagues who are different from you in one or more dimensions (e.g., gender, race, age, religion, parental status, etc.), and ask them how they view things. This will open you up to new ways of perceiving and thinking.
- **Mix it up.** Actively seek out cultural and social situations that are challenging for you—where you are in the distinct minority or are forced to see or do things differently. For example, go to a play put on by PHAMILY (an acting troupe of people with mental and physical disabilities) or attend a cultural celebration that involves customs and people you have never been exposed to. The more uncomfortable you are in these situations, the more you will grow and learn.
- **Shift perspectives.** Walk in others' shoes; look through their lenses to see how they view and experience the world. Join a group that is different (e.g., be the male ally in the women's affinity group). This will help you develop empathy and see people as individuals instead of lumping them into a group and applying stereotypes. And if you're really serious about reducing implicit racial bias, research shows that picturing yourself as having a different race results in lower scores on the race IAT. Find commonalities. It is also useful to look for and find commonalities with colleagues who have different social identities from you. Do they have pets? Are their children attending the same school as your children? Do they also like to cook, golf, or volunteer in the community? You will be surprised to discover how many things you have in common. Research shows that when you deliberately seek out areas of commonality with others, you behave differently toward them and exhibit less implicit bias. Reduce stress, fatigue, cognitive overload, and time crunches. We are all more prone to revert to unconscious bias when we are stressed, fatigued, or under severe cognitive load or time constraints. Relax and slow down decision-making so that your conscious mind drives your behavior with respect to all people and groups. Give up being color/gender/age blind. Don't buy into the popular notion that you should be blind to differences; it is impossible and backfires anyway. Your unconscious mind sees and reacts to visible differences, even if you consciously believe you don't.

Specific Tips Related to Four Biases Discussed Above

In addition to the general tips for recognizing and overcoming unconscious biases in general, here are some specific tips related to the four biases discussed above.

OVERCOMING THE AFFINITY BIAS

Recall, this is the bias that leads you to surround yourself with people like you. A few ways to avoid this bias:

1. Take note of both the similarities and differences you have with the person you are interacting with.
2. When you are deciding whether to engage or hire someone, have a diverse group of people sit in the meeting. Different perspectives and affinities can help in balancing any decision about that person.
3. **Establish clear criteria in advance of making decisions** so that bias gets taken out of the decision-making process.

OVERCOMING THE CONFIRMATION BIAS

This is the bias where people seek information that confirms pre-existing beliefs or assumptions. Here are five ways to minimize the impact of this bias:

1. Take it all in: Don't jump to conclusions.
2. Widen your information channels: Don't only read articles that have opposing views to yours, but do your very best to understand the opposing view.
3. Don't always try and be right.
4. Aim to disprove your hypothesis

OVERCOMING THE ATTRIBUTION BIAS

Again, attribution bias is the tendency to have different rationale for your own behavior versus that of others. Here are a few ways to overcome your attribution biases:

1. **Try to see the big picture.** There is usually more to a story or to someone's actions than what is immediately in front of you. Take a second to think about what else might be going on.
2. **Education on Attribution Biases.** Let people know about the kinds of bias that may be affecting their thinking.
3. **Focus on Resolving the Issues Not Who to Blame.** Once people are in problem solving mode and focused on resolving the problem rather than working out who's at fault, they are more likely to be able to resolve the issues).

OVERCOMING THE HALO EFFECT

This is the bias that occurs when your overall impression of a person impacts your evaluation of that person's specific traits. A few ways to minimize this bias:

1. **Give your first impressions a second chance:** It's almost impossible to keep yourself from making a first impression of someone you've just met but try to be critical of the first impression that you get. Try to back up your feelings toward someone with a real data. If you have a hard time finding a reason why you like or dislike someone, give them a second chance.
2. **You're also prejudged.** Reflect. If you're lucky, you also produce the Halo Effect. If you're not so lucky, you might fall victim to the Devil Effect. Take some time to reflect on the image that you project, because it's easier to see the fault in others before you see your own faults.
3. **Be coherent.** Coherence, or being loyal to your morals, code of ethics, likes, and hobbies, is essential for boosting the Halo Effect. You're coherent when you say what you think and you do what you say you'll do. If you project an incoherent image, your Halo Effect will be noticeably

reduced, because the other person will see a cheater or liar, and you might end up being judged by the Devil Effect.

4. **Be aware of your non-verbal language.** More than 70% of what the other person perceives comes from non-verbal language. The way you move, your tone of voice, looking the person in the eyes or shying away, nodding, and other small body language cues give off much more than you might think.
5. **Ask yourself questions.** Question yourself. Every time you pass a judgement about a person or object, ask yourself honestly if the answer would be different if its image was different.
6. **Avoid negative (and positive) generalizations.** Don't let yourself get carried away by other people's opinions. Try to only think about the recommendations that come from people who really know what they're talking about. If they have some kind of authority over a given subject, take their advice into consideration when making a decision. If they don't know what they're talking about, don't take their word as fact.
7. **Learn how to use your intuition well.** Finally, the most important thing in life is balance. After reading this article, don't doubt yourself and your intuitions, because they might be right! Can you imagine the number of friends you've missed out on, of the places you've never seen, or the things you haven't tried, just because of a first impression?¹²

¹² Minchew, Molly. "The Halo Effect: 10 Tricks To Successfully Manage It." CogniFit's Blog, 14 May 2018, <https://blog.cognifit.com/halo-effect-10-tricks-successfully-manage/>.