



Understanding the Unconscious Bias — Plus 4 Effective Ways to Eliminate It

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As the world begins to wake up to the broader system of inequality in our country, the call for increased diversity and inclusion has never been more clear. As the New York Times [reports](#), “We’re at an inflection point. The massive gatherings for racial justice across the country — and now, the world — have achieved a scale and level of momentum not seen in decades.”

While we seek to create lasting change on an individual, community, and global level, many leaders are wondering the same thing: How can I inspire these values in my own team, and my company as a whole? How will this shape the world of work going forward?

Although it’s hard to predict the future, one thing is certain: diversity policies are no longer just a side-note somewhere in a corporate mission statement to satisfy compliance. Instead, the inclusion and empowerment of *all* individuals — regardless of ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, or otherwise — is a moral imperative that requires active participation from the entire organization, influencing everything from hiring practices to the nature of lunch room conversation.

There are seemingly endless reasons to flip the script on monolithic workplace culture in favor of diversification. But beyond the fact that prioritizing equality in the workplace is simply the *right* thing to do, research shows that organizations with effective Diversity & Inclusion practices also benefit from:

- **Recruiting Top Talent:** Prospective candidates expect any future employer to promote meaningful diversity practices — and those who don't may have trouble recruiting high-quality employees. In fact, a study by the Society for Human Resource [Management](#) demonstrated that, “Companies that can effectively recruit and manage a diverse workforce have a clear competitive advantage.”
- **Employee Retention:** When employees feel included and valued for their unique frame of reference and life experiences, they're both less likely to leave *and* [more productive](#) at work.
- **Better Business:** To put it simply, a team with diverse perspectives is more innovative, thoughtful, solution-oriented, and ultimately better equipped to serve their clients. A 2018 study from McKinsey & Co. provides [evidence](#) that the most diverse organizations are 33% more likely to financially outperform their less-diverse competition.

While there's clear evidence to support equality in the workplace, it's also important to understand the obstacles that can impede the successful implementation of an enduring diversity initiative. No matter how enlightened or progressive we consider ourselves, everyone carries a certain degree of unconscious bias — also known as “implicit bias” or “implicit social cognition” — which refers to the set of attitudes or beliefs that subconsciously influence the way we interpret, understand, and interact with the world around us. Although we aren't consciously aware of their impact, these biases are activated every time our brains attempt to assess a new person or situation.

The majority of our unconscious biases develop during early childhood, those formative years full of observation, exposure, and first impressions that shape the lens through which we view the world. Later in life, these biases reveal themselves as we navigate the workplace as adults, informing our reactions to other people based on characteristics like physical appearance, age, and ethnicity.

As leaders, it's crucial that we recognize the unconscious biases in ourselves and our employees to help create an equally empowering workplace culture for every team member. Here are some of the warning signs of unconscious biases presenting at work:

- Similarity Bias:** Birds of a feather flock together, but that's not always the best approach when it comes to hiring practices. A similarity bias causes people to connect — or in this case, hire — individuals with whom they share similar characteristics and life experiences. So if you begin to notice that everyone in your company drives a Volvo SUV and went to the same summer camp, it might be time to make a change.
- Confirmation Bias:** The human brain has a natural tendency to seek out validation and confirmation of our opinions and world views, with general disregard for alternative points of view. This insular social reinforcement of personal biases contributes to the formation of connections to people who share the same ideology, and is often the

motivating force behind the rise of political parties, social groups, and more. If you find yourself or a team member ignoring input or opinions that challenge their own ideas, there may be a confirmation bias worth examining — and eliminating.

- c. **Perception Bias:** Our stereotypical beliefs about gender, ethnicity, education, sexual orientation, physical characteristics, and socioeconomic class subtly influence the snap-judgments we make about everyone we meet, which are often unfairly assigned based solely on first impressions. In fact, the [Association for Psychological Science](#) found that first impressions are formed within 17 seconds of meeting a new person, and 55% of your opinion of a new person is based on physical appearance alone. If you find yourself automatically categorizing an individual into a certain group based on personal or physical characteristics, your perception bias has taken control. For example, a recent IMF report showed that most people [still believe](#) the stereotype that women are better suited to supportive roles or the unpaid work of caring for the home and children, despite decades of valuable contributions from women in the workplace.

Now that we're aware of the indicators of unconscious biases, and the effect they have on employee well-being, productivity, retention, and competitive advantage, we can focus on proactive ways to eradicate these biases at the organizational level. Here are four actionable steps towards making the workplace a more positive experience for everyone:

1. Approach hiring by focusing on “Culture-Add” instead of “Culture Fit”

Rather than searching for new employees within your existing network, consider casting your hiring net a bit further afield to find new talent with a different set of experiences. Research shows that a homogeneous workforce will simply continue to generate and reinforce the same ideas, while a group of diverse perspectives can create innovative solutions that better serve your customers and company. In order to help you avoid making hiring decisions motivated by an unconscious similarity bias, consider the following practices:

- Remove the candidate's name and education from preliminary resume reviews to eliminate your brain's tendency to assign certain stereotypes based on your own experiences or assumptions.
- Develop a standard set of interview questions for each candidate, so that everyone has an equal opportunity.

2. Seek out Different Opinions and Perspectives

To reduce the likelihood that business decisions will be influenced by our confirmation biases, make a conscious effort to engage with people whose opinions challenge your own. These unique perspectives are invaluable to a sound decision-making process, as they encourage you to consider alternative angles that may have been otherwise overlooked. As the demographics of the American consumer continue to shift, organizations will benefit from internal representation

that is reflective of the population. Consider *all* employee input and opinions with equal weight, and then use data-driven research to help you make a truly objective decision.

3. Identify Internal Stereotyping

To find evidence of perception bias in your organization, ask yourself the following questions:

- a. What are the demographics of your team?
- b. What are the demographics of the C-suite?
- c. How many BIPOC, women, or LGBTQ+ employees were promoted to leadership positions compared to the number of white males during the same period of time?

[Research](#) shows that most of us subconsciously believe that tall white men are better equipped to be leaders compared to employees with similar skills but different physical characteristics. If your answers to these questions evidence a disparity between promotion of equally qualified individuals, it may be time to reconsider the perception biases that informed those decisions.

4. Consider Unconscious Bias Training

Leaders who are ready to prioritize diversity and inclusion should also consider Implicit Bias Training Programs, in which expert consultants help employees self-identify negative subconscious beliefs and the harmful consequences they create in the workplace. Leadership participation is vital to the success of any Implicit Bias Training initiative; if employees see their CEO actively working towards creating a more conscious environment at work, the positive effects will be felt throughout the entire organization.

Although the current cultural narrative is focused on racial injustice, a true diversity initiative will elevate and equalize all individuals who have been impacted by systems of oppression on an institutional level based on gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, race, and more — and it all starts with examining our personal beliefs and biases. While intrinsic unconscious biases present a significant obstacle to equality, it's important to remember that they *can* be changed with purposeful intention. By empowering individuals to uproot and eliminate their own unconscious biases, both employees and organizations will open the door to increased workplace diversity and the endless benefits that inclusion brings to companies and society as a whole.