

Common Types of Unconscious Bias in the Workplace

FLASH CARDS

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Affinity bias

What it is: Also referred to as the similarity bias, this bias is that of the tendency to prefer people of the similar mindset as our own. This includes backgrounds, thoughts, interests, and experiences. This can be harder to recognize as the age old saying goes “birds of a feather flock together.”

Why it is limiting: While in a personal setting affinity bias creates a comfort zone, in a corporate setting, this creates:

- Inhibitions when recruiting
- Discord and clique culture within the organization
- Limits team playing
- Limits creativity and innovation

Watch for: Over time this can hamper a diversity and inclusion effort.

Old thought: “We need to look for a cultural fit.”

New thought: “It’s good to challenge status quo.”

Try: Divers hiring panels, standardize interview questions, performance appraisals, etc.

Ageism

What it is: As the name suggest, it is discrimination or stereotyping against others based on their age.

Why it is limiting: Age can bring with it a wealth of experience and insight. There can be serious legal consequences for discrimination.

Watch for: This can manifest in excluding a certain person from an activity owing to age or overlooking someone for a promotion owing to age.

Old thought: “An old dog can’t learn new tricks; they can’t keep up or it’s technologically advanced.”

New thought: Create a learning culture everyone deserves the opportunity to learn and upskill.

Try: Ensure to engage all employees irrespective of age, don’t make presumptions, aim to initiate a reverse-mentor program and pair older employees with new recruits, focus on creating multi-generation acceptance.

Authority bias

What it is: The tendency to perceive authority as the ultimate and unquestioningly follow instructions.

Why it is limiting: Blindly following instructions can obstruct whistle blowing and inadvertently support fraud, jeopardize integrity etc despite good intentions.

Watch for: Request to stack information in favor of a certain outcome instead of presenting the information as it is.

Old thought: "I was merely following instructions."

New thought: Ask why, does this align with the company values, does this align with my values?

Try: Ask questions and determine if the details are well thought out or originating merely from a place of authority, do your own research, ask other managers or team members for their insight and opinions.

Beauty bias

What it is: Favorable treatment and or positive stereotyping of individuals based on the perception of their attractiveness or physical beauty a.k.a 'Lookism.'

Why it is limiting: This can seriously hamper recruitment or promotion initiatives.

Watch for: Nominations for a person who looks or dresses a certain way.

Old thought: "Looks can sell – if you look at the part half the work is already done for you."

New thought: "Capability and skills make the person!"

Try: Avoiding beauty bias by eliminating pictures and including phone screening at the point of hiring, base promotions, and appraisal on standardized metrics.

Confirmation bias

What it is: The tendency to look for information which only supports a certain perspective, cherry-picking of information to support a view.

Why it is limiting: Confirmation bias affects an individual's ability to think objectively and critically. It will overshadow the risk factors if both to and for options are not considered.

Watch for: Control groups who are predisposition to a certain outcome, group think.

Old thought: "It's my way or the highway."

New thought: "What is the alternative to consider?"

Try: As much as possible, get multiple views and sources of information when testing a hypothesis, standardize questions in interviews, performance evaluations and promotions.

Conformity bias

What it is: Like group think, when a person tends to change opinions and behaviors to fit in with the group, and a true representation is not offered.

Why it is limiting: Similar to confirmation bias, because of choosing to go with the majority opinion, the interpretation of an outcome is skewed and opposing viewpoints are never presented. Conformity prevents conflict but limits creativity.

Watch for: Proposals or votes with no opposition, teammates who do not offer a point of view at all.

Old thought: "Don't rock the boat."

New thought: "Everyone has a point of view which is worth considering."

Try: Using voting and survey anonymously, gather advance opinions privately.

Contrast effect

What it is: The forming of an opinion using someone else as a benchmark.

Why it is limiting: This is limiting because it causes dissatisfaction and disengagement. Additionally, it can create a toxic work environment.

Watch for: This can happen both ways an employer can have this towards employees or employees can have this among themselves.

Old thought: "I need to be like the best performer."

New thought: "I need to meet my KPI's and maintain a good work-life balance."

Try: Use multiple anchor points or traits for comparison rather than individuals, use supporting documentation when providing examples at performance appraisals and performance scenarios to avoid bias. Create a set of values and KPI's rather than contrasting to an individual's performance.

Gender bias

What it is: Perhaps the most easily identifiable bias where one gender is favored over the other – also referred to as sexism.

Why it is limiting: By giving preference to one gender over the other the organization is missing out on valuable resources in the long run.

Watch for: Hiring preferences during recruitment drives or pay gaps where one gender is paid higher for the same job role. Career limiting for certain populations.

Old thought: "Individuals are limited by their gender and therefore cannot perform at desired levels in a corporate setting."

New thought: Meritocracy: merit allotted to a job well done, skills and capabilities – gender is not a factor.

Try: Formalized gender-neutral recruitment standards, define a profile ahead of time and evaluate against that standard. When it comes to performance appraisals and performance measures against a set KPI – with standardized scoring.

Name bias

What it is: A tendency or preference towards certain names above others.

Why it is limiting: Prevalent during interviews, this bias causes one to overlook candidates with names.

Watch for: Name trends within the organization.

Old thought: "A name defines you."

New thought: "Your work and work quality define you."

Try: Removing or masking names at the point of recruitment, refer to them as candidate numbers/codes, instead of revealing personal details.

The halo effect

What it is: When an overall positive impression is developed about someone based on one instance, quality or trait – inadvertently placing the person on a pedestal.

Why it is limiting: This constructed image formed with limited information can be blind to a person's faults and shortcomings.

Watch for: Assumptions of an individual's performance even before they have been assigned a task.

Old thought: Virtue by association. It's either black or white – no in-between.

New thought: No matter the association, the quality of your work will speak for you.

Try: At the interview process have multiple interview levels and an interview panel, to offer multiple perspectives, for interviews and promotions a standardized matrix will help level the playing field.

The horns effect

What it is: This is the opposite of the halo effect where one small trait or experience will cause an overall negative impression.

Why it is limiting: A slanted view can cause unfair and inaccurate or unjust judgments, or conclusion of a person. This could also cause legal issues.

Watch for: Negative talk or feeling towards an employee or employee group with no supporting reasons.

Old thought: Guilty until proven innocent.

New thought: A person should be allowed to build their own credibility and not be dismissed based on one negative instance.

Try: Be open to change opinions of people, take time to get to know people before you assign them to a box. Ensure your judgements are based on evidence, in the case of appraisal and promotions insist on supporting documents i.e. emails, past appraisal documents etc.