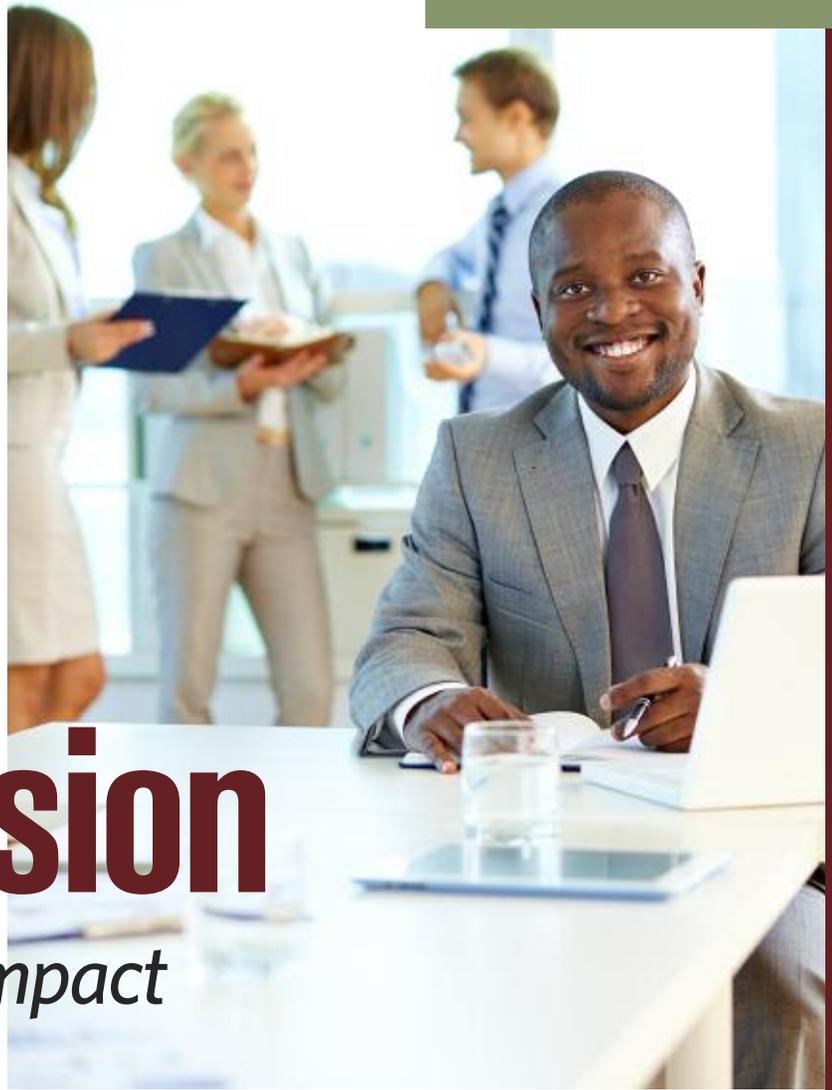


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# Diversity and Inclusion

## *Understanding the Impact of Unconscious Bias*

NORA SPINKS AND NATHAN BATTAMS

As humans, we make assumptions, determinations and decisions every moment of every day. We sort through and prioritize countless pieces of information about people we meet and things we see, hear and experience. Our brains, constantly bombarded with information and sensory input, *need* to do this to make sense of the world and assess our surroundings – but it's not without its consequences. Familiarity or similarity (whether it's in terms of people, situations or settings) is typically perceived as more comfortable and feels safe, whereas difference is often interpreted by our brain as less valued, less important or even threatening.

Neuropsychologists and biological psychologists believe that this process, termed *unconscious bias* (also referred to as “implicit” or “hidden” bias), is inextricably connected to our brain's alert system. It is thought that our brains rely on unconscious bias to determine whether or not we are at risk and whether we should fight, flee or freeze. The brain filters,

organizes, groups and sorts individuals into predetermined categories based on how much they are the same as we are. Brain imaging scans have revealed that we make unconscious decisions such as these in less than one-tenth of a second,<sup>1</sup> often without intention or even awareness.

While unconscious bias is a natural phenomenon, it is still a bias – one that can act as a barrier to inclusion in our lives, workplaces and communities. It can even reinforce or bolster stereotypes and prejudices, and research has shown that unconscious bias can result in reflexive assumptions about an individual's skills, ability, interests, goals and so on. The effects are multifaceted and not always obvious; our unconscious filtering of people is very subtle and can result in micro behaviours that can make others feel excluded, such as failing to make eye contact during a handshake or generally being less attentive, empathetic or supportive.



## One study about unconscious bias among children found that most appear to form detectable, implicit and explicit attitudes and biases as early as age 6.

Our experiences, socialization and exposure to other views about groups of people form and shape unconscious bias. They can result in *learned associations* related to age/generational cohort, culture/race, socio-economic status or gender. We start developing our unconscious biases when we are children, and they are often transmitted through family members and peers. One study about unconscious bias among children found that most appear to form detectable, implicit and explicit attitudes and biases as early as age 6, where they are shown to have a preference for their own social group. These implicit biases persist with age even though explicit, self-reported preference for one's own group usually subsides over time.<sup>2</sup>

Unconscious bias and learned associations affect our views on any number of social groupings. For example, if a managing partner in a law firm once worked with a female lawyer with young children who wanted flexibility and wouldn't consider working evenings and weekends until her children were school-age, the manager might later apply this belief ("new mothers can't/won't work weekends") to other new mothers, regardless of their wants. They would therefore not be working on evenings or weekends, and this bias could then be unconsciously confirmed and reinforced. In addition, working less could be detrimental to their careers, and the effects of the bias would consequently spill over into household and community life.

Unconscious bias in the workplace can have a negative impact on organizations, which can result in decisions or responses that may be interpreted as stereotyping and lead to employee complaints or an increase in turnover. The real-life impact of unconscious bias was demonstrated in a job-application study in which researchers at MIT found that applicants were most likely to be called back by prospective employers

when they used "typically white" names on the resumés, regardless of having only average qualifications compared to their non-white counterparts (despite the fact that the prospective employers in the study were "aggressively seeking diversity").<sup>3</sup> Again, the effects of this bias can "trickle down" into household and community life.

Recognizing, understanding and managing unconscious bias is key to creating and maintaining inclusiveness in our workplaces and communities, but it is neither simple nor straightforward. A conscious bias or prejudice (e.g. an employee regularly stating that "older workers hate technology") is easy to recognize and combat, but unconscious bias first requires awareness of habits and beliefs that are *by definition* not in the forefront of one's mind. However, it is possible to mitigate, resist and manage unconscious bias. Our biases start to develop when we are quite young, but we can also develop *awareness* of our biases as children - the first step toward managing them. Biases can be transmitted through family members and peers, but so too can our awareness so that our behaviour is not as easily guided by them.

Managing unconscious bias requires thorough self-assessment, reflection, humility and open communication. It also requires a willingness to adjust our perceptions, change our behaviours and modify our language. The starting point is simply being aware of unconscious bias, how it works and how it affects us on an individual level. But we cannot do it alone: mutual help and guidance between different people is key, because, as previously noted, this bias is unconscious and subtle, and it manifests itself in thought, language and actions. Managing and mitigating unconscious bias needs to involve ongoing dialogue - there is no quick fix.

Our brains contain a bias control mechanism that can help prevent our biases from affecting our behaviour.<sup>4</sup> Activation of this mechanism requires a conflict between our wider goals (e.g. a belief in equality or desire to avoid reprimand) and our biased preferences in particular people/beliefs/language. If a household, community or workplace works to create an environment that values fairness and equity in a sincere and consistent manner, individuals will be more likely to internalize these values. The unconscious mind can then be less vulnerable to the effect of bias.

There are countless benefits to becoming aware of unconscious bias in ourselves, our colleagues and our workplaces, aside from simply avoiding complaints and turnover. A bias-free environment facilitates free and clear thinking, helps to retain and leverage talent, and improves human resource decisions generally. While it may not be explicit, an environment hampered by unconscious bias is *felt* by individuals, and it can impede creativity, productivity, openness and problem-solving.

It can seem unfair – even an affront to our individuality and autonomy – that biases that we play no deliberate role in creating can have such a profound impact on us and the people around us. But, equipped with our current understanding of brain development and its impact on our behaviour, we can take an active role in recognizing and managing our biases. Informed by years of research on the topic, we now know that unconscious bias can impede diversity and inclusion strategies. By engaging each other in conversation about unconscious bias, employees can help prevent their assumptions and perceptions from affecting their beliefs, language and judgment.

While combatting and defying unconscious bias takes significant and sustained effort, doing so is imperative: if individuals and organizations don't become aware of their unconscious biases, they will not only miss out on leveraging talent, but will also unwittingly be perpetuating the status quo and impeding growth and change. ◀

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<sup>1</sup> Tinu Cornish and Pete Jones, *Unconscious Bias Fact Sheet* (2012), accessed January 30, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1bk0Cnw>.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Scott Baron and Mahzarin R. Banaji, "The Development of Implicit Attitudes: Evidence of Race Evaluations from Ages 6 and 10 and Adulthood," *Psychological Science* (January 2006), accessed January 30, 2014, <http://1.usa.gov/1dvDCBU>.

<sup>3</sup> Marianne Bertrand and Mullainathan Sendhil, "Are Emily and Greg More Employable Than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination," *American Economic Review* (2004), 94(4), accessed January 30, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1ie84oD>.

<sup>4</sup> Equality Challenge Unit, *Unconscious Bias and Higher Education* (September 2013), accessed January 30, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1bnnSnY>.



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## Unconscious Bias at Work: Height and Career Success

- Less than **15%** of U.S. men are over six feet tall, yet almost **60%** of corporate CEOs are at least this height.
- Less than **4%** of U.S. men are over six feet, two inches tall, yet more than **36%** of corporate CEOs are at least this height.
- The last U.S. President whose height was below average was William McKinley in 1896, and he was "ridiculed in the press as 'a little boy.'"
- When corrected for age and gender, an inch of height is worth approximately **\$789** per year in salary.\*

This disproportionate representation of tall people in high-profile career positions may seem shocking or bizarre, but it demonstrates the power that unconscious bias and learned associations can have on people's thought processes. When people become familiarized with taller people being in leadership positions, our brains unconsciously draw associations between their personal characteristics and their position. Research has found significant relationships between height and social esteem, leadership emergence and workplace success.\*\* With sufficient awareness and countermeasures against biases such as these, the effects of unconscious bias can be mitigated.

\*Howard Ross, *Proven Strategies for Addressing Unconscious Bias in the Workplace* (2008), accessed January 30, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1o0VgpX>.

\*\*Timothy A. Judge and Daniel M. Cable, "The Effect of Physical Height on Workplace Success and Income: Preliminary Test of a Theoretical Model," *Journal of Applied Psychology* (June 2004), accessed January 30, 2014, <http://1.usa.gov/1bw7hU>.