

## **The Potential Influence of Unconscious Bias**

Although we may believe that we are objective scholars and professionals who are able to evaluate individuals based entirely on merit and on the quality of their work and the nature of their achievements, an enormous body of research has shown that every one of us brings with us a lifetime of experience and cultural context that shapes the way in which we size up other individuals.

Studies show that people who have strong egalitarian values and believe they are not biased may, in fact, implicitly or inadvertently behave in discriminatory ways. A first step toward ensuring fairness in the evaluation process and creating inclusion is to recognize that implicit biases, attitudes, and other influences not related to the qualifications, contributions, behaviors, and personalities of individuals can influence our assessment of them, even if we are committed to egalitarian principles.

The results from many controlled research studies in which individuals are asked to make judgments about human subjects demonstrate the potentially prejudicial nature of our many implicit assumptions. These implicit or unconscious biases show up in a range of situations from our everyday social interactions to those that have a clear connection to hiring for faculty and staff positions or evaluating individuals for promotion and tenure.

It is important to note that in most of these studies, the gender and sometimes the race or ethnicity of the evaluator was not significant, indicating that people in general share and apply some of the same assumptions.

## **The Power of Unconscious Biases**

- Such biases are pervasive
- Biases can occur even when there is no intent or motivation to be biased (and in fact the perceiver might be horrified to realize the bias)
- Biases are a product of what are otherwise very normal cognitive processes essential for navigating a complex environment
- Biases derive from expectations or learned associations based on our “models” of the world
- Simply talking about bias is often insufficient for eliminating its influence

## **Examples of Possible Unconscious Biases**

Decades of research demonstrate that biases show up over and over again at every level of personal interaction and are pervasive in organizations.

1. Having higher or lower expectations of people
2. Over valuing people who share a similar background to our own
3. Avoiding people who are different from us
4. Feeling distant or disconnected from people who are different from us
5. Making negative assumptions about how an interaction will go

## Practices That Can Minimize the Impact of Unconscious Bias<sup>i</sup>

### 1. Reflect on your impressions

- Greatest amount of bias happens in the early stages of the “acquaintance process”.
- Run “mental simulations” of the situation or your response to someone by substituting a different gender, ethnicity, etc. and considering whether this changes the narrative you construct about the person or nature of an interaction.
- Talk through your thinking with someone who often has a different approach than you or someone you don’t know well or connect with as easily.
- Have a plan in mind for how you will handle situations when you recognize that bias is at play, which can include slowing down or taking more time to respond or make a decision, gathering more data, or seeking additional feedback.

### 2. Learn to recognize and interrupt cues that trigger bias

- Focus on personal characteristics of the individual and not the broader social group you associate with the person.
- Identify one thing that you may have in common with a person different from you.
- Develop criteria and follow a process that helps you focus specifically on relevant facts and information.

### 3. Create a culture of pointing out bias or the potential for bias

- Elicit feedback and be open to receiving it through a range of formats.
- Encourage everyone to take part in recognizing and pointing out potential bias and value them for doing so.

### 4. Take care to get in touch with your own emotional state before interacting with someone who feels unfamiliar or different from you or whom you’ve formulated strong opinions about.

- In anticipation of interacting with someone different or unfamiliar, focus on coming across as relaxed and friendly rather than trying to suppress potential bias. This framework has been shown to be more effective for mitigating bias.
- Slow down or take more time to prepare in order to be present and calm.

### 5. Practice perspective taking skills to build empathy for people with a different background, world view, or social identity from your own.

### 6. Use the right criteria for evaluating a person’s needs or behaviors and think through whether that criteria would make sense if you were dealing with someone of a different race, gender, sexual orientation, age, etc.

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<sup>i</sup> Adapted from *Implicit Gender Bias in the Academy*, 2015 Diversity Summit, Bernadette Park, Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience, University of Colorado Boulder.