How to Reduce Unconscious Bias in the Workplace

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By
Lattice Team
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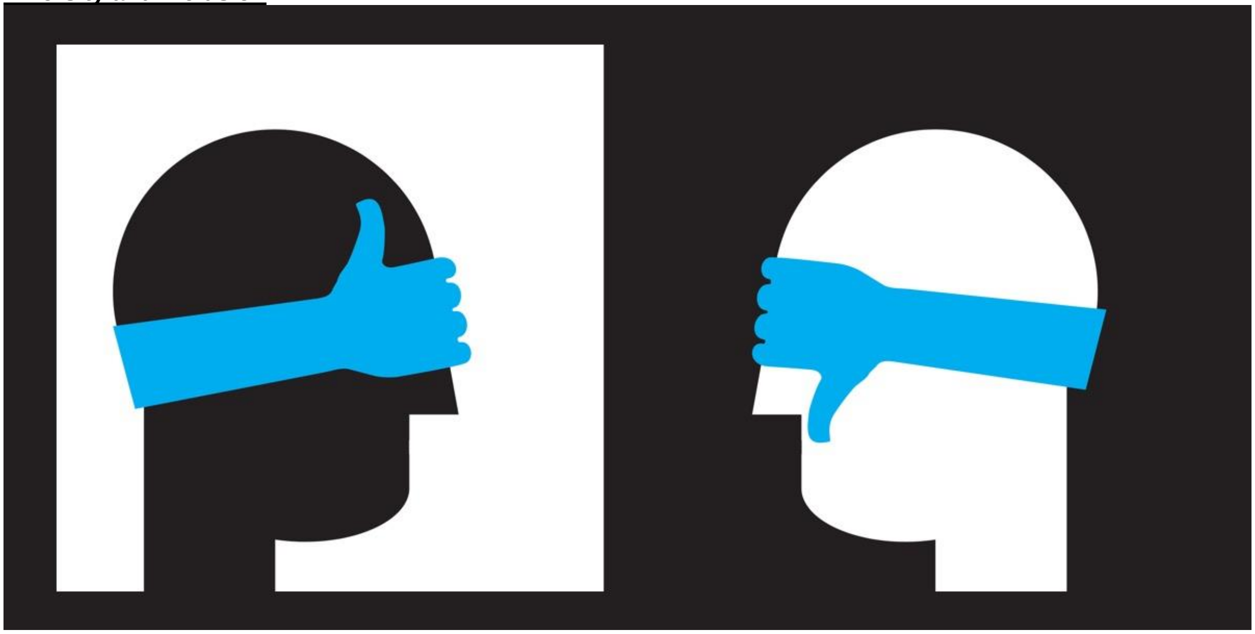

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No matter how much we might not want to admit it, unconscious biases influence a vast majority of our decisions. This is due to the fact that our brains can consciously process 40 pieces of information per second — while we unconsciously process 11 *million* pieces. So, in order to keep up with all of the stimuli around us, we create mental shortcuts that ostensibly make decision-making easier.

Unfortunately, many of these shortcuts do more harm than good. A Yale study found that — when given the choice between two similar candidates, one from each sex — college faculty preferred hiring male candidates who they perceived to be more competent and worthy of commanding higher salaries. It didn’t matter whether faculty members were male or female; all were biased against women applicants.

“Despite efforts to recruit and retain more women,” the researchers wrote, “a stark gender disparity persists within academic science.”

If unconscious biases aren't kept in check, organizations and the employees that power them might let these biases influence their decisions in a way that holds them back.

Examples of Unconscious Bias

What exactly does unconscious bias look like at the workplace? Here are some examples:

1. The Halo Effect

In the 1920s, psychologist Edward Thorndike found that people who think highly of an individual in a certain way are likely to think highly of them in several other ways. For example, if we think someone is good looking, we’ll probably also think they are intelligent and charismatic. Thorndike described this as the “halo effect.” Managers need to be wary of generalizing an employee’s performance based on one specific characteristic of their personality or appearance. They need to also understand that just because someone might have done an A-plus job on a project six months ago doesn’t necessarily mean that person is still contributing as effectively. (The opposite effect is called the “horns effect.” Just because someone dropped the ball once doesn’t mean they’re incapable of improving.)

2. Preferring Certain Names

One study found that candidates with foreign-sounding names were 28% less likely to be called into an interview than candidates with “Anglo” sounding names, like John Smith and Julie Thomas. A separate study found that candidates with “white-sounding names” were 50% more likely to get called back for an interview than candidates with “black-sounding names.” Despite their best intentions, hiring managers may be guilty of being influenced by similar biases that preclude them from interviewing a more diverse set of candidates.

3. Gender Bias

At the office, an assertive woman might be perceived as “aggressive” while a man with the same attributes might be described as “confident.” This is an example of the gender bias, which is more prevalent than many might want to admit. One recent study, for example, found that male scientists were likely to place more value on the opinions of their male colleagues than their female colleagues. Companies that are influenced by gender bias will miss out on great ideas and likely disengage the women that work for them.

4. Similarity Bias

Companies often prefer hiring candidates who’ve worked at specific companies or schools. For example, Silicon Valley tech companies are most likely to hire candidates who went to UC Berkeley. This is an example of the similarity bias, which says that we tend to enjoy working with people who are similar to us. Companies that *only* hire candidates with particular experiences may be held back by groupthink.

5. Confirmation Bias

Thanks to confirmation bias, once we make a decision or opinion about something, we tend to look for information that confirms our beliefs and overlook information that goes against them. This is perhaps why the Coca-Cola Company's disastrous New Coke product came to the market in the first place. Despite the fact that loyal Coke drinkers were perfectly happy with the product, Coca-Cola's executives felt the need to shake things up in 1985 as a response to Pepsi's increasing popularity. Once the decision-makers settled on releasing a new product, they ignored evidence suggesting their customers were satisfied by the original recipe.

6. "Bro-propriating"

In a group meeting, a female member of the team makes a point that no one seems to feel too strongly about. Thirty minutes later, a male member of the team makes the same point — and everyone jumps on board with "his" idea. Companies that allow this kind of behavior to exist at the workplace will discourage women from sharing their ideas.

7. Height Discrimination.

Companies tend to promote tall people, particularly men, into senior roles; in fact, the average male CEO is three inches taller than the average male. This is part of the reason why tall employees make anywhere between 9–15% more than their counterparts. If your company doesn’t have any shorter folks in upper management — or taller employees command higher salaries than shorter ones — you could be affected by an unconscious bias.

Now that you have a good idea of what unconscious biases look like, let’s turn our attention to what you can do, specifically, to reduce the chances your company is governed by them.

Steps to Eliminate Unconscious Bias

Unconscious biases don't have to be permanent. While it may be impossible to completely eradicate these biases, we can take steps to reduce the chances as many of our decisions are influenced by them. Follow these nine steps to limit the unconscious biases at your organization.

1. Learn what unconscious biases are.

The first step of limiting the impact unconscious biases have on your organization is making sure everyone is aware that they exist. “Awareness training is the first step to unraveling unconscious bias because it allows employees to recognize that everyone possesses them and to identify their own,” explains Francesca Gino, a professor at Harvard Business School.

2. Assess which biases are most likely to affect you.

Take tests—like Harvard’s Implicit Association Test—to figure out which of your individual perceptions are most likely to be governed by unconscious biases. Armed with that information, you can take proactive steps to address them on a personal basis.

3. Figure out where biases are likely to affect your company.

Biases tend to affect who gets hired, who gets promoted, who gets raises and who gets what kind of work, among other things. By knowing where bias is most likely to creep in, you can take steps to ensure that biases are considered when important decisions are made in those areas.

4. Modernize your approach to hiring.

In order to make sure that unconscious biases don’t adversely impact your hiring decisions, you may need to make some big changes. For example, studies show that the wording in job descriptions, can discourage women from applying for certain positions. Rework job descriptions so you’re able to draw from a wider pool of applicants. You may also want to try judging candidates “blindly,” i.e., not looking at anyone’s name or gender and instead hiring on merit alone. Additionally, consider giving candidates sample assignments to see what their work contributions might look like. Finally, standardize the interview process, as unstructured interviews tend to lead to bad hiring decisions.

5. Let data inform your decisions.

If your company's upper management echelons are only staffed by white men, unconscious biases are determining which employees are promoted. Make it a priority to diversify your management team so that more voices and backgrounds are represented.

6. Bring diversity into your hiring decisions.

If your goal is to hire a diverse staff, make sure that there's diversity among the group of people tasked with hiring new employees. Otherwise, you may continue hiring the same kinds of homogenous workers — despite your best intentions.

7. Encourage team members to speak up about biases.

The more people involved in a decision — and the more transparent the decision-making process is — the less likely an organization will be to be affected by unconscious biases. Create a culture that encourages open dialogue. That way, when employees realize a decision might have been influenced by unconscious biases, they won't be afraid to speak up and set the record straight.

8. Hold employees accountable.

Actions speak louder than words. While you shouldn't necessarily punish someone for making a decision influenced by unconscious biases, you should keep track of whether such decisions are being made. "If a manager gives 10 performance reviews, five to men and five to women, and four out of the highest five are women, it should at the very least call for an inquiry into whether there might be a pro-female bias in the process," writes Howard J. Ross in the *Harvard Business Review*. "It might be total coincidence, but it is worth checking." If the data reveals bias, someone may need to intervene.

9. Set diversity and inclusion goals.

From more innovation to more talented employees to higher retention rates, there are a number of reasons why companies should focus on creating diverse workplaces. Set diversity and inclusion goals to make sure that your diversity program is more than just lip service and you actually make progress toward building a diverse team.

All of us are affected by unconscious biases. From an organizational perspective, the sooner we realize this reality — and take proactive steps to overcome the biases that hold us back — the stronger our companies will become, and the better positioned we'll all be to serve our customers effectively.