



Introduction to
Unconscious Bias

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Know what works at work.[™]

A quick-start guide to help you understand the basics of Unconscious Bias in the workplace.

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Know what works at work.™

What is unconscious bias?

Unconscious bias occurs when you make spontaneous judgments about people or situations based on your past experiences, culture, background, or exposure to media. It often manifests itself as an impression or gut feeling that shapes your perception, often in ways that are hard to articulate. These hidden preferences or prejudices can affect nearly every decision you make.

Is unconscious bias bad?

Unconscious bias is not always bad. The fact is, we use all kinds of mental shortcuts countless times every day. Unconscious bias is part of being human, and it's a tool for self-preservation that we have been leveraging from the beginning of time.

In the workplace, however, it has broader implications, some of which might be detrimental. Unconscious bias is a way we quickly process information and make decisions. These decisions can be risky if they are based solely on the bias and not rooted in objective facts.

How could unconscious bias harm my business?

In the workplace, it's common – and often a huge benefit to employees and the organization -- for employees who share interests or personality traits to develop a certain level of friendship. The challenge comes into play when friendships affect the opportunities available to certain employees. If you are more familiar with a particular employee, you could be more likely to include, assign, recommend, or judge that team member differently than another with whom you are less familiar.

Unconscious bias can also interrupt prudent consideration of objective facts. For example, imagine you discover some commonalities with a prospective employee during an interview. He went to the same college, you have a mutual friend, or you both backpacked across Europe after graduation. Feeling that connection may lead you to choose that individual over another candidate who could bring more value to the company. These decisions are made countless times a day and compound over time. This could result in your organization being unable to reach its full potential.



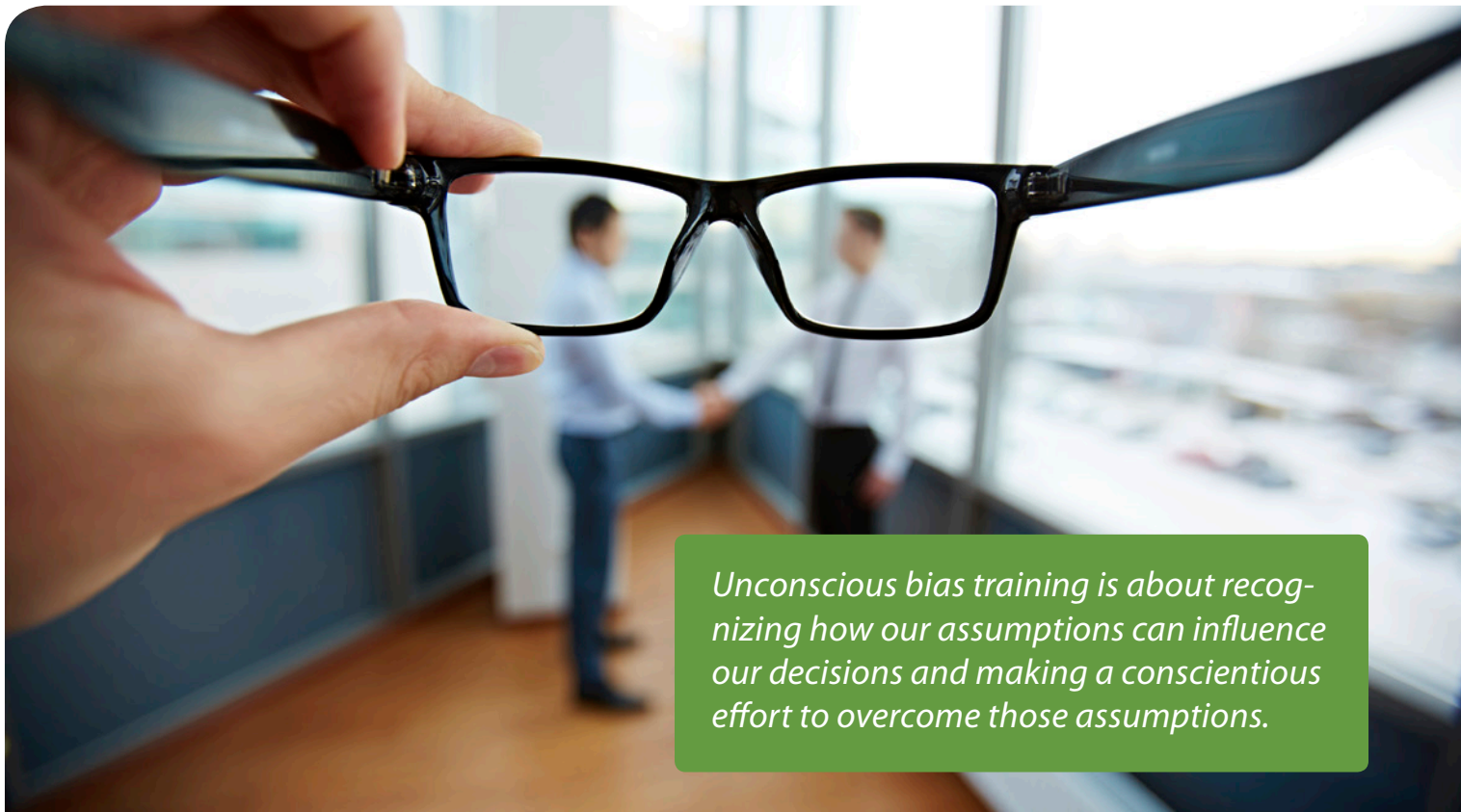
What is unconscious bias?

What to do about unconscious bias

The goal of the training is for your employees and managers to be fair and make the most objective decision possible. If employees recognize their tendencies, they can proactively identify these blind spots and avoid non-objective decisions.

It's not entirely possible to solve the issue of unconscious bias in the workplace. The key is to choose a few specific areas to focus on instead of addressing it broadly. Unconscious bias training is about recognizing how our assumptions can influence our decisions and making a conscientious effort to overcome those assumptions.

The real danger of unconscious bias is that it divides people into an us vs. them mentality. Working to address specific areas around unconscious bias will lead to a more diverse, unified, and connected workforce that operates at its full potential.



WHAT IS UNCONSCIOUS BIAS?

Unconscious bias occurs when you make spontaneous judgments about people or situations based on your past experiences, culture, background, or exposure to media.

These hidden preferences or prejudices can affect nearly every decision you make.

EXAMPLES OF UNCONSCIOUS BIAS



This candidate sounds great!

Resumes are a common source of unconscious bias. In one study, managers were given a set of identical resumes where only the names had been changed. Resumes with the Anglo sounding names received substantially more callbacks than those with diverse names.



She's not great with computers.

Assigning a project with a significant technical component? The best choice is a Generation Y-er, not the Baby Boomer, right? This could be an accurate assumption, but it's not always the case. Evaluating competency based on age is a common mistake.



HELP! My video is upside down.

When YouTube launched the video upload feature for their app, 5-10% of videos were uploaded upside down. Google engineers had inadvertently designed the app for right-handed users. They never considered the fact that phones are usually rotated 180 degrees when held in a user's left hand.

What microaggression means for your workplace

Ask five co-workers for a definition of microaggression and you will likely receive five different responses. While people may have a general idea of what microaggression is, many are unsure of its exact meaning. Understanding the definition of microaggression is important but knowing what it means for your workplace is even more critical.

What is microaggression?

One often-used definition of microaggression is a “subtle but offensive comment or action directed at a minority that is often unintentional or unconsciously reinforces a stereotype.” Many times microaggression can be viewed as a form of unconscious bias.

As with unconscious bias, microaggression begins with making spontaneous judgments about people or situations based on the “observers” impressions of another’s past experiences, culture, or background. Unconscious bias is not inherently wrong, and it’s used every day to navigate the world; however, these types of judgments can cause serious workplace trouble when they are solely based on “mental shortcuts” and do not take facts into account.

The paradox of microaggression

In one sense, the definition of microaggression is problematic because it’s a paradox. Behavior that is considered to be unconscious is, by nature, unintentional while aggression is inherently defined as intentional. Labeling an action as microaggression would mean that it is both unintentional and intentional at the same time.

When a behavior is marked as a microaggression, there’s an accusation of aggression against another person. This is a strong charge that should not be taken lightly. It’s worth asking if a person can be guilty of intentional behavior when they’re unaware of doing so.

The real problem with labeling this behavior as “aggressive” is that it can lead to an escalation as the term itself suggests a conscious action. In the workplace, de-escalating these situations should be the primary objective.


What microaggression means for your workplace

How to address microaggression in the workplace

Creating a culture where employees are encouraged to speak up is the only way to fully address microaggression. One employee may not recognize the effect of a statement or action, but the offended employee clearly feels the negative impact. It needs to be addressed before feelings begin to fester. Healthy workplaces are built with employees who feel comfortable speaking up and expressing their concerns. If your employees remain silent, the offenders will continue to offend because they are unaware that their actions were hurtful.

“I know you probably didn’t mean it this way, but this is what it meant to me,” is a powerful statement that will positively impact your culture. A few seconds of courage can open the door to a meaningful discussion and resolution. In most instances, the offender will apologize and certainly rethink similar statements in the future.

Microaggression is a potentially divisive topic, and an effective training program that teaches your team how to address these issues through communication will go a long way in creating a healthy, productive, and civil workplace.



A few seconds of courage can open the door to a meaningful discussion and resolution.

Where does unconscious bias fit within your corporate training?

Many organizations are beginning to understand the magnitude and importance of dealing with unconscious bias, which raises questions about where it best fits within a corporate training program.


When handled well, unconscious bias training will help employees challenge their assumptions so they can objectively make decisions that are in the best interest of the company. Handled poorly, it can be perceived as judgmental or controlling, and lead to an overwhelming sense that employees can't even think without being biased.

The big picture

The topic of unconscious bias is important in itself, but the overall effect it has on your company's culture is of critical importance. The best approach is to address how unconscious bias relates to specific actions and behaviors rather than from a broad perspective. Creating a positive impact on your culture should be the focus of your training and takes precedent over a single topic. At ELI, we counsel clients to focus on their core company culture and then address unconscious bias after the baseline training has taken place. It serves as a part of the message, but is not the core component.

What to avoid

Unconscious bias training is complex and requires a quality program to be effective. Attendees should leave the training with an understanding of what unconscious bias is and its impact. Most importantly, employees should learn how to mitigate the negative effects of unconscious bias in the workplace. Many times employees understand the challenge but leave the training without any specific actions or takeaways. Training that focuses on unconscious bias should highlight clear and actionable steps that employees can take when they recognize behavior that should be challenged. The best way to manage unconscious bias is to create a workplace where employees are encouraged to speak freely and constructively about a topic, and where they are open to discussion without the fear of judgment.



Creating a positive impact on your culture should be the focus of your training and takes precedent over a single topic.

Where does unconscious bias fit within your corporate training?

Diversity and inclusion

Diversity and inclusion is an area of corporate training that can significantly benefit from the subject of unconscious bias. In fact, many companies find that it fits best in this arena. Simply opening up the dialogue and encouraging conversations will significantly help cultivate a vibrant and inclusive corporate culture.

Training should focus on helping managers understand the dangers of looking at people from the perspective of whether or not they think someone might be a “good fit.” Quick decisions that don’t take the facts into consideration can degrade your culture. These assumptions can leave talented employees sitting on the sidelines, or could lead them to walk out the door. Your management team needs a simple set of guidelines and a solid plan for addressing unconscious bias in the workplace.

Solving the problem of unconscious bias in the workplace

The first step in managing unconscious bias in the workplace is to ensure employees understand exactly what it is, when it happens, and the ways in which it can impact your business objectives. Employees should be encouraged to discuss these biases, raise issues, listen to each other, and collaborate on solutions. Educating employees during a two-hour session is the start of what should be a continuous effort involving daily conversations that eventually shape your company culture.



Five real-world examples of unconscious bias

Unconscious bias can be a difficult topic to explain. After all, if something is unconscious, how do you even know that it exists? To shed some light on the issue and increase understanding, we've put together five real-world examples of unconscious bias.

1. HELPI My video is upside down.

Many times we think of unconscious bias as being about race or age, but it covers a much broader spectrum and no one, it seems, is immune to stumbling over it. Google supplied an excellent example of how even a simple bias can affect your business.

When YouTube launched the video upload feature for their app, 5-10% of videos were uploaded upside-down, and Google developers were baffled. Could such a large percentage of users be shooting their videos incorrectly? "Incorrectly" was the key word. Google engineers had inadvertently designed the app for right-handed users. They never considered the fact that phones are usually rotated 180 degrees when held in a user's left hand.

With the help of unconscious bias, Google had created an app that worked best for right-handed users and never addressed the possibility of a left-handed user. We think Google needs a little more diversity on their team... any left-handed engineers need a job?

An interviewer's bias makes a substantial difference in the selection arena. Very talented applicants would have been turned away for unfounded reasons.

2. This candidate sounds great!

Resumes are a consistent source of unconscious bias. One particular study gave a group of managers a set of resumes. Some of them were exact duplicates where only the names had been changed. Resumes with the Anglo sounding names received substantially more callbacks than those with diverse names of other origins. Clearly the names and their associated biases were what impacted the decisions instead of the qualifications and value they could bring to the company.

Activities were another source of assumptions. Those that sounded more prestigious, like polo or horseback riding vs. basketball or softball, skewed the perception of the candidate. Those engaged in more distinguished sounding activities were considered more refined and successful than their counterparts, simply because of their perceived financial status. These conclusions may have very well been valid, but they could just as easily be untrue. An interviewer's bias makes a substantial difference in the selection arena. Very talented applicants would have been turned away for unfounded reasons.

Five real-world examples of unconscious bias

3. She's not great with computers.

Assigning a project with a significant technical component? The best choice is a Generation Y-er, not the Baby Boomer, right? This could be an accurate assumption, but it's not always the case. It's not wise to base a decision on an idea or belief that doesn't have the facts to support it.

There are many times when a manager or employee will frame their unconscious bias as common sense. However, your Xbox playing, mobile app developing Baby Boomer may be more tech-savvy than most. By assigning the project to a younger, less experienced employee, you could potentially sacrifice quality or miss out on an innovative idea. Evaluating competency based on age is a common mistake and one that could be costly to your company.

4. You remind me of someone I know.

Have you ever worked with or hired someone who reminded you of another person? It's a subtle, but real form of unconscious bias. The feelings and opinions you associate with another person can easily influence the way you see someone else.

Leaders have the responsibility to put aside past experiences and see the person as an individual. This can be difficult at times, so leaders should feel comfortable enough to ask for input from others. Letting a past experience shape your current decisions is unfair to you, the potential employee, and the company.

Leaders have the responsibility to put aside past experiences and see the person as an individual.



Five real-world examples of unconscious bias

5. He speaks the language.

A manager has a high-profile urban project that needs a qualified project manager to get the job done and uses “common sense” to select an African American project manager. When asked about the decision, the manager states that his choice “is a great fit” and “speaks the language.”

It’s not overtly racist; it’s simply an assumption that because this person is African American, he must be more familiar with the urban environment and the issues the community faces. The reality may be that this African American project manager grew up in the suburbs, went to private school, played polo and has had no experience living in an urban community. He may or may not be the best project manager for the job, but the choice could have easily been based on an invalid assumption completely unrelated to the requirements of the project.

These simple examples demonstrate how easily unconscious bias can creep into your business, shape daily decisions, and impact your company. Recognizing its influence is the key to making objective decisions and avoiding these common mistakes.

THE FINANCIAL BENEFITS OF DIVERSITY



Companies with high gender diversity are 15% more likely to outperform.



Racially diverse companies are 35% more likely to have higher financial returns.

*Can ethnic or gender diversity affect the financial performance of a company? **In a word, yes.***

A study by McKinsey found a direct relationship between diversity and financial performance. Companies in the top 25% of racial and gender diversity consistently outperform competitors and national standards.

These companies experienced a 0.8% rise in profits for every 10% increase in racial and ethnic diversity on the senior executive team.

Source: McKinsey analysis

Working to address specific areas around unconscious bias will lead to a workforce that operates at its full potential.





How biased are you?
Find out at
Project Implicit

Join over two million people who've taken an Implicit Association Test

Visit <https://implicit.harvard.edu> and take one of 14 Implicit Association Tests (IAT) to gauge your bias on issues ranging from race and age to gender and religion. Developed by scientists at Harvard, the University of Washington, and the University of Virginia, the tests measure the unconscious associations between concepts and values. Warning... you may be surprised by the results!

UNCONSCIOUS BIAS IN THE WORKPLACE

What you need to know

1

Make sure employees understand exactly what unconscious bias is, when it happens, and the ways in which it can impact your business objectives.

Training should highlight clear and actionable steps that employees can take when they recognize behavior that should be challenged.

2

3

Create a workplace where employees are encouraged to speak freely about a topic, and where they are open to discussion without the fear of judgment.

The topic of unconscious bias is important in itself, but the overall effect it has on your company's culture is of critical importance.

4

“One of the most challenging barriers to diversity and inclusion is unconscious bias. Diversity and inclusion is not a priority because it is something nice to have, it's a must to have if we are to fulfill our mission to provide excellent service.”

Beth Cobert - Acting Director, United States Office of Personnel Management

ELI is a training company that helps organizations solve the problem of bad behavior in the workplace. This means more than just preventing discrimination and harassment lawsuits. It's about addressing the bigger costs of lost productivity, turnover, and brand damage caused by uncivil behavior.

Our award-winning training experiences are based around real-life scenarios and are backed by our deep legal expertise and a proactive, high-touch approach. It's how we've helped many of the world's best-known brands build a workplace that works.



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