

# Unconscious Bias

## Introduction

- We are all programmed to subconsciously categorise others, make prejudiced judgements and jump to conclusions.
- Bias is an inclination or prejudice for or against a person or group, especially in a way that is considered to be unfair.
- Bias favours 'in-groups' (people who we perceive to be like us) and disadvantages 'out-groups' (those who are very different to us, or with whom we do not identify).
- The human tendency to be biased is a natural result of evolution, and has developed over many thousands of years. This natural tendency is further reinforced through a process of continual socialisation.
- The University is committed to equality, diversity and inclusion and therefore we want to eliminate any negative bias that limits opportunities or creativity, or leads to discrimination.

## Unconscious bias in the workplace

- When unconscious bias comes into play, our decisions may not be as robust and objective as we believe them to be. These irrational, bias-based decisions and behaviour can prevent colleagues and students from performing at their best.
- Bias can creep into any situation where individuals have the power to influence outcomes through their decisions and action. So there are important implications for recruitment, people development, performance management, workforce retention, leadership and working with students.
- In law it is not necessary to prove intention to establish discrimination liability. So long as a probable case is made, tribunals can infer subconscious prejudice resulting in discrimination, particularly if other indicators such as recruitment monitoring show a tendency for or against a particular group.

- Implicit association: We have a tendency to believe that all people in a certain group have the same attributes because it's an easy way to process information. Sometimes we realise we are doing this, but often we don't.
- Affinity bias: We often automatically favour others with whom we share certain characteristics, behaviours or experiences – those who belong to our 'in-group'. There is much evidence to show the power of affinity bias in recruitment or people management situations.
- Self-fulfilling prophecy: Our actions and decisions are often (unintentionally) tailored to confirm our hidden biases. So, if we feel negatively about young people (for example) we may subconsciously be on the look-out for something that will justify our bias.
- The unconscious organisation: Deep-seated organisational habits, values and norms, and 'the way we do things round here' can have an enormous influence on employee behaviours and morale. It's fine if you fit in and go along with these values, but if you see things differently it is really hard to challenge them when they are in the 'organisational unconscious'.
- To minimise the danger of unconscious bias in the interview process you should be consistent: Give all candidates the same information about the selection process; Limit personal questions and small-talk; Give all candidates an opportunity to give you evidence of how well they meet each of the selection criteria by asking open questions based on the criteria and following up with probes eliciting the candidate's own experience in that area; Keep notes; Avoid affirming one candidate's performance, but not that of others. Remind yourself that you will not be prejudiced, for example when interviewing a disabled person or a woman for a job most often done by men.
- In all organisations, it is important to ask how diversity policies translate into practice. For example, is there a deep-rooted, but organisational unconscious bias against people without a similar (or similar) background?

It can be tricky to override your unconscious biases when you are not aware of them. But the starting point is to accept that in general terms we are all likely to be biased in some respects, and that this will affect our actions and decisions. We should not feel guilty, but accept responsibility for monitoring our own behaviours:

- Commit consciously to being fair and respectful to everyone you come into contact with.
- If you suspect you hold a bias for a particular group, try to analyse why this is. Where does the bias come from, and what does it mean? What is your first recollection of feeling this way? Was the bias triggered by a particular event, or learned from a particular person? Take both practical and cognitive approaches to minimising the impact of your bias: base your decisions on robust criteria and remind yourself frequently that you will not be prejudiced.
- Actively contribute to creating a workplace where diversity matters and where equality is taken seriously – and where different views and ways of working are valued. Support or initiate projects that promote positive images and stereotypes of diversity.
- Affirm others appropriately and consistently, so that encouragement and criticism are not subconsciously driven by bias.
- Review your responsibilities with regard to every aspect of people management and the employment life cycle, and check for hidden bias in the following areas: Shortlisting; Interviewing; Mentoring; Learning and development; Performance evaluation; Identifying high performers; Promotion and termination.
- Keep good records of decisions and justifications, and monitor outcomes for patterns that might suggest unintentional bias.