

Unconscious Bias in Decision-Making



To some people, it is often very surprising that well-intentioned leaders make poor decisions. One way of explaining this, is our influence of innate biases. Unconscious biases are those that occur automatically, triggered by our brain making quick judgments of people and situations based on previously determined judgments or socially accepted norms while disregarding any level of rationality or good judgment.

In a recent survey of 98 managers and HR leaders, conducted by a digital learning platform, 60.2% said they have experienced unconscious bias at work. Sixty one of those 98 managers admitted that unconscious biases had affected their own decision-making at work.

Unfortunately, it is unlikely that we can eliminate our biases, as they are a natural part of human functioning. According to Psychologist Joseph LeDoux, biases are our “danger detectors,” as it provides a quick way to ensure our safety. We make fast judgments about what is “normal” and what is not and often this works in our favour. For example, a leader may sense that certain behaviours are consistently more dependable and may develop a “bias” toward those behaviours.

Even if biases are many times not correct, it is still quicker to use a “rule” than view every similar situation as new. In organisations, unconscious biases affects how people recruit people, make appointments, mentor employees (or not), assign tasks, delegate work, choose people for training, listen to people’s ideas, make promotional choices, give performance reviews and treat customers.

It is important to note that biases can be both positive or negative. Apart from overt biases based on, for example, race and gender, some other common biases are:

- **Affinity Bias:** Affinity bias refers to when you unconsciously prefer people who share qualities with you or someone you like. It occurs because your brain sees them as familiar and relatable, and we all prefer to be around people we can relate to.
- **Confirmation Bias:** Confirmation bias refers to how people primarily search for bits of evidence that back up their opinions, rather than looking at the whole picture.
- **Halo Effect:** The halo effect occurs when we focus on one particularly great feature about a person. You view everything about the person in a positive light, which makes you think they are more perfect than they are.
- **Horns Effect:** The horns effect is the opposite of the halo effect. You focus on one particularly negative feature about a person, which clouds your view of their other qualities.
- **Beauty Bias:** Thinking that the most beautiful/handsome individual will be the most successful. This can also play out in terms of other physical attributes (e.g. height, tone of voice). Interestingly, while 60% of CEOs in the US are over 6 foot, only 15% of the total population is over 6 foot tall. And while 36% of US CEOs are over 6.2 feet, only 4% the population is over 6.2 feet tall.

As previously stated, biases cannot be eliminated, however there are ways in which to mitigate their negative effects on organisational decision-making:

1. Building self-awareness that everyone has biases. If we accept and are more aware of our biases, they are less likely to cloud decision making.
2. Develop tactics that enable more conscious decision-making:
 1. Priming is a memory effect that gets created when one activity subtly, and often unconsciously, impacts subsequent behaviours. By consciously priming people to pay attention to potential areas of bias, they can be encouraged to be more conscious of their decision-making processes. For example, before reviewing CVs, managers can be asked to respond to a series of questions like:
3. *“Does this person’s CV remind you in any way about yourself?”*
4. *“Does it remind you of somebody you know? Is that positive or negative?”*
5. *“Are there things about the CV that particularly influence your impression? Are they really relevant to the job?”*
6. *“What assessments have you already made about the person? Are these grounded in solid information or are they simply your interpretations?”*

1. Reorganising structures and systems can also help reduce the impact of bias. Systems in organisations create behaviours, for example, in terms of consistency of practices. For example, structured interviewing processes, in which the questions are consistent across candidates, have been found to reduce bias relative to unstructured interviews.
2. Putting into place, accountability measures, can make it easier to see when bias is occurring. An example of this is if one manager consistently rates his female subordinates lower than the males. An inquiry can then occur, in order to probe why this occurred and if bias was involved.

References

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