Managing Unconscious Bias to Strengthen Corporate Culture

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A man and his son are driving home one night when they have a high speed collision with a telephone pole. Tragically, the man dies on site, while the son is rushed to hospital for emergency treatment. As the stretcher enters the operating studio, the surgeon, upon seeing the boy, stalls and says, "I cannot operate, for this boy is my son." Who is the surgeon?

Like myself, if you have not heard this before you may take some time to realise who the surgeon is. You are not alone, and you may have fallen foul of the bias of stereotype categorisation - that a surgeon is a man. And while you may not identify as sexist, it is likely that you made an assumption about gender identity based on limited information, and you did it unconsciously. As humans, we do this all the time.
Can unconscious bias be managed?

People recognise that the world and the workplace with it are changing. With change comes the need to adapt our way of thinking to address the plethora of current global challenges. This also means challenging the mental habits, paradigms and assumptions that have been successful right up until the 21st century.

As companies vie to keep up with these changes, it’s important to recognize that many of the attitudes and behaviours of people involved will be unconsciously influenced. This can be both useful and hindering, so understanding this can be paramount.

Unconscious bias is a catch-all phrase for how we make decisions that are based on “rules of thumb” rather than all the facts. There is a fast-increasing body of knowledge exploring this tricky human phenomena. Businesses are now keen to catch-up with the science in order to improve the experience they provide to both their customers and employees. From changing the way businesses hire and hold meetings, through to how they reach their markets, understanding the predictable (but not always rationale) choices of human beings will help improve their customer’s experience strategy. The potential here is only just being realised.

“Our irrational behaviours are neither random nor senseless – they are systematic and predictable. We all make the same types of mistakes over and over...”

-- Daniel Ariely - Predictable Irrationality

There are many layers of conscious and unconscious thinking. We are more unconscious than conscious. For example, you are probably not even conscious of your breathing—until I mention it. We only become conscious of things through our senses and our attention. However, we can’t be conscious of all of our senses all of the time. As we grow up, we filter information to create mental shortcuts and develop habits that help us get by. It is these consciously created “rules of thumb” that once learned, become unconscious. Like habits, unconscious biases are hard things to break.

These biases are formed in our brains unknowingly throughout our lifetime. Some help us be more efficient or put real “brainpower” to other tasks. But some of these biases may lead to workplace discrimination, unhealthy risk aversion, overinflated confidence, and poor business decisions. It’s important to understand them in order to use them effectively, rather than just be governed by them.
Understand the situation

The first step to tackling unconscious bias is to raise awareness in ourselves and call it out in others. As leaders, we cannot begin to do anything about it if we refuse to recognise its existence. We may even be contributing to the problem.

As Megan Smith, U.S. CTO at Google says: “If you’re not conscious of the biases that you have, you’re just not contributing to the level that you could and you are not innovating to the level that you could. And so your products won’t be as good. Your results won’t be as good.”

Just as there are hundreds of unconscious biases, there are as many ways for it to show up in the workplace. Three common areas where it has an impact are sales & marketing; employee engagement; and leadership & decision making.

Overcome bias in sales & marketing

Three biases are particularly prevalent here:

- **Availability cascade (Recency bias).** If the information is easy to recall, then we believe it is more likely to be true. This is enforced by repetition as well as by recent events.

- **Affinity bias.** People like people like themselves

- **Rhyme as reason bias.** Emphasis is more powerful than logic (“no pain, no gain”, for example)

**Availability/recency bias:** We are bombarded with more information than we know what to do with. To make assessments about this information, we tend to make short cuts. For example, if I were to ask you how happy you are, your answer would most likely be influenced by what comes to mind first. Psychologists have discovered that people are influenced by things as random as the kind of images on display in the background, what questions they were just asked, or even if they’ve found a small coin. Furthermore, most people were not ever aware that they had been influenced by these things. Product placement is a tactic marketers use to tap into this bias, for example.

**Affinity bias:** People prefer to say yes to people they know and like, says author and professor Robert Cialdini. “Not only do people like people like themselves, but they find comfort in identifying commonalities,” he adds. “This is particularly important in new situations where we are less at ease.”

Most salespeople know this intuitively.

Furthermore, the research suggests that when strangers find common ground, they have more successful outcomes at a negotiation. Research shows that in negotiations when people engage in a short period of social exchange and identify common ground, they experience 20 percent less chance of deadlock.

**Rhyme as reason bias:** Simply put, the rhyme as reason effect (or Eaton-Rosen phenomenon) is a tendency to hear rhyming statements as more truthful. A famous example was used in the O.J. Simpson trial when the defence used the phrase, “If the gloves don’t fit, then you must acquit.”
CASE STUDY:
Optimising sales with a better store experience

As part of a global retail transformation, we worked with a large telecommunications company to improve their store accessibility. This was done with both a physical layout refit, and training that incorporated practical examples to work with different needs of customers from ability to communication style. The programme touched over 55,000 employees and improved both their customer experience and their profitability.

Proactively fight bias to build employee engagement

Bias, both conscious and unconscious, impacts the way that organisations attract and engage their employees in recruitment, retention, and contribution.

Recruitment: There has been much research into where stereotype biases have impacted recruitment, most notably studying how potential employers respond to CVs with different names on them. The more “ethnic” a name of the candidate, the less likely they were to be contacted, even when all the information on the CV matched a familiar name.

To mitigate this bias, consider what information you really need when creating a job posting. Some less essential information may trigger unconscious bias, like what school applicants graduated from or how old they are. Many organisations and governments now use forms that separate identity characteristics from job specification questions. Also, it pays to be clear about what you want: understand the job selection criteria for success and repeat out loud with your co-assessors to mitigate unconscious prejudices.

Retention: People can be impacted by the negative stories attached to stereotypes. Stereotype threat influences not only hiring but also performance, appraisals, and feelings of belonging. These biases can be unconsciously triggered with visual imagery that reinforces stereotypes, or by asking people to identify certain characteristics, like race or age. In addition, exposure to positive or negative portrayals of
people of a particular identity will unconsciously impact the way that people of that identity perform under pressure. Subjects do not even have to recall the images they were exposed to for them to have an impact. Further research has shown that even background images will affect people’s behaviour, both toward others’ and subconsciously on their own ability to perform.

To combat these biases, companies should use language that highlights inclusion rather than exclusion, and opportunity rather than limitation.

**Contribution:** Feelings of inclusion and value also show up in the way employees contribute and perform at work. In his book Drive, Dan Pink cites autonomy, or the ability to direct one’s own life, as an essential ingredient in driving discretionary effort. If choice isn’t granted in the workplace, then people will feel less like giving up their time. Employees want to feel they have control of their destiny.

Making sure you engage your employees in the organisation’s purpose and allow them to find how they can contribute to this can help people, particularly those under-represented in the workplace, to feel more included – and help your company’s bottom line.9

**CASE STUDY:**

**Little things make a big difference**

To thwart unconscious bias, one of our clients renamed conference rooms to address gender bias, and changed the images on its corporate materials to reflect its customer base and drive a culture of inclusion.
Leaders set the tone of corporate culture

Leaders have an opportunity, and an obligation, to consciously shape their businesses and build on what works by rising above learned and habitual responses that no longer suit the current state of play.

Alongside training and branding, there is a lot leaders can do to set the tone of an organisation. The first thing is to raise their own awareness. Greater awareness leads to progress in other key areas, including:

- **Analysis and diagnostics**: Committing resources to collecting data about why people stay or leave, matching qualitative and quantitative information.
- **Training programmes**: Attending and endorsing culture change programmes at the very top is key to their success.
- **Structural changes**: Reimagine recruitment and retention strategies; performance and compensation.
- **Environment and culture**: Setting leaders’ language and actions, values and vision.

It is through environment and culture that leaders make the biggest contribution to whether the business successfully addresses its biases. They do this by both setting the direction of the business, and also by “walking the talk.”

The biggest challenge any person faces is their willingness to face uncertainty with an open mind. Uncertainty usually creates fear and encourages self-protecting beliefs. This in turn leads us to find comfort in the familiar—surroundings, people, or mental habits. We may even be prone to confirmation bias when under threat to give us a sense of certainty.

Ironically, it is in uncertainty that most need to rise above these biases to make new connections and to reach new understandings. Leaders who can do this that have really mastered their role.
CASE STUDY:

Insurance business defeats bias from the top down

An insurance company wished to attack unconscious bias in the organisation. Its CEO recently sponsored a leadership programme for all leaders. Using various communications including hashtags and a call to action, the organisation is starting to embed conversations addressing bias through its management to its entire team, including into yearly reviews. In addition, the company is setting up measurements and structures that support any desired culture change that is essential to success.
Where to start?

Once you are aware of some of the biases in your organisation, you can do something about them. It is one thing to be aware of stereotypes and biases, but we also have to also take actions. In fact, some researchers argue that raising awareness alone simply normalises their bias and “lets people off the hook.”

Here are steps that you, your organisation, and your leadership can take to mitigate unconscious bias at work:

Individual steps

Step 1: Know you’re biased
Raise awareness of your own and your organisation’s biases. Organisations that believe they are not biased often make worse decisions than those that do.

There are a series of tests, created by Harvard Business School, available online for free. https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html

This will not only increase your own awareness, but also evidence your commitment to tackling unconscious bias at work. Be clear with everyone that raising awareness is only the start. By raising awareness you are asking for social permission to implement systems, processes, and tools to eliminate the risk and lost value of the bias.

ACTION: Follow the above link and undertake unconscious bias awareness training.

Step 2: Track your behaviour
Record and reflect on your own biases and behaviour. Keeping a journal about your prejudice can help bring up patterns and causes in your own behaviour that may help or hinder your leadership style. Identifying these can help you prepare to take different actions through priming, humility, and curiosity. We are all biased. Being humble and acknowledging it helps both you and others to accept it.

ACTION: Record your own instances of bias.

Step 3: Confidence and conflict training
Unconscious bias can highlight a number of the challenges to working with others, especially if they are not conscious of their own biases. Focusing on this obstacle can actually create a defeatist attitude that highlights many reasons why things won’t work, thus further disempowering employees. To effectively work with other’s bias, it is important to focus on the positive outcomes and how taking action will support one’s own personal goals, rather than what might get in the way. Increasing awareness of these dynamics can also help people focus on strategies that have the best chance of succeeding. Ultimately however, addressing bias will take some degree of confidence and a willingness to step into the unknown.

ACTION: Undertake practical confidence and conflict training and coaching.
Step 4: Take a moment

Instil the behaviour of ‘taking a moment.’ Congratulations! You have just done this by reading this article. The length of a ‘moment’ can vary from a couple of seconds to days. The goal is to challenge and check decisions and reasons for decisions and actively look for bias. Take a scientific approach and actively search for the potential of bias rather than prove the hypothesis that the decision contains no bias.

ACTION: For key decisions embed ‘Take a moment’ time breaks and review processes.

Step 5: Appreciate diversity

Inclusivity implies that differences do exist and necessarily appreciates diversity. Whilst teams may have alignment of purpose, goals or a vision they may have differences in strategy or style in achieving these goals. This can create friction which can result in behaviour that can undermine the organisation’s efforts to have everyone adding value (e.g. aggression or avoidance behaviours that create a false harmony rather than healthy conflict).

ACTION: Acknowledge differences beyond the visible and protected characteristics and appreciate that they are an essential part of a thriving team. Seek to identify the positive aspects of behaviours you don’t understand or even dislike.

Organisational steps

Step 1: Getting the right data

Collect organisational data that can drive accurate analysis of the patterns of exclusion and inclusion. It is the only way to remove denial. Logic says there should be diversity and inclusion. If there isn’t inclusion with diversity, then it suggests there is bias in place.

ACTION: Consult your HR team for the data they collect on performance trends, as well as hiring and exit data that includes quantitative and qualitative measures. Use a network analysis diagnostic to look at where people do and do not communicate and share information.

Step 2: Targets vs. quotas

If there was a gap in a business metric of any other sort, we would proactively set new targets. It seems logical to do so for the crucial metrics surrounding people, as well. But be careful. It is our experience that minority group members often perceive they are not really valued for their contribution, even if there is no quota.

ACTION: Set and communicate diversity and inclusivity targets along with the positive rationale for them.
Step 3: Process and disciplines

Not only is awareness alone not enough, but unconscious bias thrives under pressure. At work, we make many of our decisions under pressure, making us more susceptible to “snap judgements.” So it’s important to instal certain disciplines and follow processes during situations where unconscious bias may be present.

**ACTION:** Review every people process and instil effective bias governance. Create a series of “If... Then...” plans. For example: If I have three candidates, then I will ensure their CVs are viewed without names.

Step 4: Checklists

Make sure you have a structure or checklist in each department against which you can check you outcomes. Add structure to the answers as well as the questions centric and avoid reputational disasters.

**ACTION:** Create product/service checklists in each department. Start by identifying your assumptions to help identify what might be left out.

Step 5: Know your environment

Is there equality of space? What are the cues of acceptability? Are your meeting rooms named after men or white people? Are the images ‘male’? Are social activities varied? What is the dress code? Are the heroes found in paintings or pictures diverse?

**ACTION:** Walk the floor as a customer and review the symbolism—both intended and unintended, that create the environment, both for employees and customers.

**Actions for Leaders**

Step 1: Use feedback

Unconscious bias is unconscious. Even with systems and processes we are susceptible to it especially under time constraints. An open, honest, feedback culture enables an organisation to both raise issues and mitigate against unhelpful bias but also helps the teams remove guilt, shame or anxiety about their bias.

A feedback culture and feedback mechanics within decision making scenarios give people the chance to check selectivity and bias, both yours and others.

**ACTION:** Take an anonymous 360 report requesting assessments of your behaviour.

Step 2: Collective decision making

It’s ok to use your imagination and beliefs to collaborate on decisions. Ask the question: “What if?”

**ACTION:** Use collective tools liked Edward De Bono’s “6 Hats” to assess your plans.13

Step 3: Use your language to positively prime your organisation
Shift the recency bias effect by presenting an equality prime. “We wouldn’t expect to see any gender differences in these tests/applications for promotions.” This often send subtle coded messages that get decoded by the receiver and create self-fulfilling placebo prophecies.

**Step 4: Use others**
Check the language that you use: Would it sound different if it was being spoken by a man than a woman—or to a man or a woman?

**ACTION:** Share your communications with people who you normally wouldn’t see on a daily basis and ask for feedback. There are even apps that can check for you.

**Step 5: Lean in collectively**
Don’t just lean in. Make sure that the strategy is scalable rather than leaving it to ‘minorities’ to assert themselves. Lean in collectively.

**ACTION:** If you see others being excluded, say something to bring them in or raise awareness.

**Step 6: Change both what is true and what should be true**
Recent experiments have illustrated that people tend to align male characteristics more closely to leadership characteristics than female ones. Organisations will need to change the paradigm of what successful leaders are so that women can expect to see themselves in senior positions rather than seeing themselves as being more ‘male-like’ than female like to get the senior role.

**ACTION:** Redefine and strongly communicate the definitions of leadership, including all genders.

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**A final word**

The cumulative effect of bias—multiplied over time and generations reminds me of the grain of rice on a chessboard story where the number of grains increases from square to square by doubling the previous square... By the time you get to the 64th square there are millions of grains of rice. Whereabouts are you on your leadership board?
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About TeleTech

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