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eBook



How to Manage Unconscious Bias
to Make Better People Decisions





For many, bias is a negative term. But unconscious bias is a neutral topic that refers to our physiology. It's when our unconscious feelings shortcut our decision-making—which can lead to skewed results.

Unconscious bias is a relatively simple concept. Our brains are wired like relational databases. We're actually wired to "guess at" answers based on the existing data in our brains. And when we have limited information (limited experiences with specific groups of people), we rely on a minimal set of images and associations. Just like artificial intelligence (AI) triggers responses based on patterns and associations, our brain does the same thing.

Typically, it's an efficient process—such as extrapolating how to use an unfamiliar electronic device. But, sometimes, it's inaccurate and leads to poor decisions that impact people—some positively and some negatively. But at its core, unconscious bias is a team performance issue. To perform at the highest levels, we all need a framework for making excellent, fact-based people and talent decisions.

For example, unconscious bias impacts recruitment and often leads to the **leaky diversity funnel**. It impacts who gets heard, how people are perceived, and who gets an opportunity to advance their career in the organization. It also affects who feels included, which, in turn, impacts recruitment and retention.

In this guide, based on Emtrain's unconscious bias experts' experience and training program, you will:

- Gain an overview of the main unconscious bias concepts
- Learn practical strategies for managing unconscious bias in the workplace
- Receive a framework for making good, fact-based people decisions and creating a high-performance culture of inclusion



What is Unconscious Bias?

Our brains are hard-wired to pattern match images to triage information and make decisions quickly. And our stored mental images are informed by our past experiences, cultural influences, and media. When our mental images are confined to a limited data set, it tends to skew our decisions so that some decisions are made because they "feel" right but are not based on objective facts. Unconscious bias has critical implications when it comes to workplace people decisions as it affects:

- Who gets hired
- Who gets heard
- Who is perceived as a leader
- Who gets promoted



In today's competitive market, the team with the best talent who can best respond to market needs is typically the winning team. The ability to recruit and retain the highest caliber talent increasingly requires developing excellent people decision skills and creating a culture of inclusion.

The Negatives of Pattern Matching

Race, gender, and age are the first three things we notice about people, according to [a recent Harvard study](#). That means the things we see first play a huge role in how we engage and judge them. Unconscious bias and pattern matching are always in play because of the way our brain works. Our mental pictures influence how we perceive race, gender, and age. Positive reactions from co-workers, customers, and clients can lift us up and make us feel welcome. Negative reactions give us a headwind and make it clear we're not part of the team.

- **Race and Cultural Background**
People often associate race and culture with key characteristics like wealth, position, or education.
- **Gender**
Gender bias impacts our view of men, women, non-binary, and transgender people. This includes which jobs and behaviors are deemed appropriate for each gender—and how we react to them.



- **Age**
We now have five generations in the workforce. But people still associate different skills and contributions with people based on their age.
- **Other Characteristics**
Faulty associations can be triggered by many characteristics—including things like disabilities, religion, pregnancy, and others. And their impact isn't limited to the first meeting. It continues throughout our relationships.

Pattern matching negatively impacts both individuals and teams. At the individual level, pattern matching gives some people an edge for reasons unrelated to their abilities or work performance. And it puts obstacles in the way of others who have to overcome peoples' inaccurate assumptions. At the team level, pattern matching can influence decisions that are critical to team performance, such as:

- **How work is assigned**
- **Which ideas get heard**
- **Who's promoted**
- **How committed people are to the team and their own performance**



Exercise

Q

When you think about your work team, how many races, genders, and generations are represented?



1-2



3-4



5-6



6+



Microaggressions

Microaggressions are subtle but offensive comments or actions that are unintentional, yet reinforce a previous mental image associated with someone's race, age, gender, etc. Microaggressions further marginalize people who may already feel marginalized. Microaggressions can make people feel out of place or disrespected. It starts with a mental leap based on very little information—like how old someone is or their race or gender. Unconscious bias can also cause us to breach personal boundaries or objectify someone.

What do microaggressions look like?

- Being ignored or overlooked
- Expected to have inferior abilities
- Being talked down to or treated as if you are stupid
- Having your ideas minimized or devalued
- Someone else claims your ideas as their own
- Treated in an overly intimate or personal way
- Being stared at or objectified
- Being excluded from conversations or activities



Strategies to Minimize Unconscious Bias

It's fine to say that unconscious bias is a result of how our brain works. But you've got a job to do, and that means making decisions—often with little time or information. So focus on the situation where the decision is important, or the impact of a misfire would be significant. Then, take three easy steps to identify and reduce the impact of unconscious bias.

STEP

1

See the Risk

First, see the **Risk**. Take a minute to think about the risk bias could pose to your decision-making. Ask yourself questions like:

- Why do I see this person this way?
- Do the facts support the way I'm looking at this situation?
- How am I approaching this problem or decision?
- Why do I feel the way I do about this situation?
- Why am I doing what I'm doing?

STEP

2

Assess the Consequences

Second, assess the **Consequences**. Think about the specific ways bias could hurt your decision-making and skew the results. Ask yourself whether bias could keep your from:

- Choosing the right person for an assignment
- Hearing everyone and surfacing the best idea
- Using someone's skills to their fullest
- Seeing and recognizing the best performance
- Giving everyone the chance they deserve to shine

STEP

3

Create a Process

Third, create a structured **Process**. Create a process to ensure you stay focused on the facts and results that matter—and then use it consistently.

Who Does More Tasks?

Research shows women perform more team, non-promotable support tasks than men. People who always perform these tasks are often perceived differently than those who don't.

Wondering if bias might impact support tasks on your team? Ask yourself:

- Who does the support tasks on this team?
- Are the tasks often assigned to the same people?
- Do I automatically assume certain people will handle the tasks? If so, why?

Implement a process that distributes supporting duties fairly around the team. That way, no one is overly burdened or starts to look like less of a leader due to all the support duties.

A solid process for support tasks:

- Identify the non-promotable, support tasks of the team
- The team manager should round-robin these support tasks
- Track the team's weekly support tasks, including how long they take and who's doing them

Who Gets Heard in Meetings?

Bias in meetings can impact who gets heard and whose ideas are valued. And that goes to the heart of decision-making and who is valued. One way bias can manifest itself in meetings is by who gets interrupted—and shut out of the conversation. Research consistently shows that women get interrupted in meetings twice as frequently as men.



Wondering whether bias might be impacting your meetings? Ask yourself:

- Was everyone heard?
- Who spoke the most? Do the same people do all the talking?
- Did some people get interrupted a lot? Do the same people do all the interrupting?
- Did you discuss everyone's ideas, or were some quickly shot down?

To conduct inclusive meetings, create a meeting process that includes:

- An agenda
- A facilitator
- A process that ensures everyone gets heard

There is also the role of the upstander or ally who is a person who acts when they see that someone is not being heard and actively creates a more inclusive environment.

A solid process for running meetings:

- The meeting facilitator circulates a proposed agenda the day before the meeting
- The facilitator starts the meeting with getting agreement on agenda items
- The facilitator is responsible for ensuring everyone is heard at the meeting
- All participants agree to limit interruptions and ensure every perspective is heard



Who Gets Recruited and Hired?

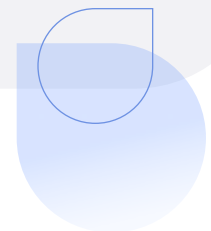
Bias can impact who gets an interview or hired. **Research shows** that just knowing a candidate's race, gender, or age can impact how we evaluate their qualifications and desirability. Bias can impact our interview assessment. In fact, **in one study**, resumes with white sounding names received 50% more calls for interviews than identical resumes with black-sounding names. Another study showed that 79% of candidates were deemed worthy of hire when a male name was used. The 79% dropped to 40% when the identical resume had a woman's name rather than a man's name.

When we interview, we have more positive emotions when we share something in common with the candidate. Conversely, we can be more guarded and negative when we seemingly lack any commonality with the candidate. There's also confirmation bias when we reach a judgment about a candidate early on, and then we look for evidence to support our quick judgment. So basically, unconscious bias helps some and hinders others, which means you might:

- Hire some people based on assumptions about their potential or expected performance
- Hire others only after they demonstrate obvious achievement

That also means that bias in recruitment can cause you to:

- Overlook outstanding candidates
- Hire less qualified candidates
- Over represent a certain demographic or point of view on your team
- Trigger a reputation for not being inclusive





A good resume evaluation process:

- Identify essential skills and the amount (and type) of experience required for the job
- Select all resumes that meet the identified criteria
- Design questions that have the candidates describing their skills and experience in the context of past projects. Don't let them just answer with conclusions. Have them describe with real activities that reflect (or not) their skills and experience

A good interview process:

- Design 4-5 questions that ask candidates to walk through a typical project to see how well their skills and experience match your team's needs
- Distribute 1-2 of these questions to each interviewer based on their roles and future interaction with the open role
- Provide a form or other method for interviewers to score answers to their questions immediately post-interview
- Score and stack rank all interviewed candidates
- Debrief with all interviewers regarding candidates' strengths and weaknesses

Who Gets Ahead?

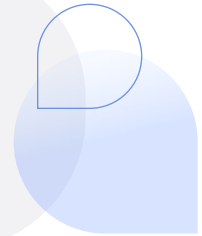
Bias influences our perceptions of people to the benefit of some, and the detriment of others. For some, that means they get praised for conduct that doesn't warrant praise. For others, that means legitimate contributions are discounted or ignored. Several studies by the Pew Research Center and Harvard Business Review show how we hold women and people of color to a higher standard.

One study focused on performance feedback at a tech company. Women received 31% more negative feedback than men, with a focus on subjective personality traits such as "aggressive." In men, "aggressive" is seen positively while in women, it is seen as a negative trait. Women leaders are also **judged harshly** if they don't conform to gender expectations. For example, "niceness" is expected in women leaders but not in their male counterparts. "Abrasive", "difficult", and "unreasonable" are terms often used to describe women leaders but those terms translate to "hard-charging" and "demanding" when used to describe men.



Bias in performance development can hurt individuals and teams by:

- Overlooking key contributors
- Skewing who gets promoted and who doesn't
- Demoralizing team members making valuable contributions



It's important to use a structured process to evaluate everyone's strengths and weaknesses as it's critical to fair and accurate evaluations.

A good evaluation process:

- Identifies what a job's essential skills for success look like
- Rates employees based on documented actions or behaviors
- Supports the ratings with specific examples that show success, average work, or unsuccessful work performance
- Compares ratings across the team to ensure consistent standards are applied

Winning Teams Manage Unconscious Bias in the Workplace

The talent in our workplace helps determine whether we succeed or fail as an organization. We cannot afford to allow unconscious bias influence and skew our people decisions. By following the steps outlined in this guide, and investing the time to understand the dynamics of unconscious bias, you will make better, more fact-based people decisions and create a more inclusive culture.

If you are struggling with unconscious bias in your workplace, [request a free course trial](#) of Emtrain's Unconscious Bias training program.

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