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Unconscious Bias Awareness for Managers

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Introduction

The idea of unconscious bias is often misunderstood. People might not understand where unconscious bias ends and conscious discrimination starts. They might think that it solely relates to how we think about other people. And yet, ultimately, unconscious bias is simultaneously much simpler and much more complex than those common misunderstandings might lead you to believe.

At its root, unconscious bias relates to how we make decisions about anything, not just people.

It's important to get a grasp of the concept for several reasons. First of all, it will improve your own thinking and reactions to the world around you. Secondly, it will help you manage employees. And finally, it will develop your strategic thinking.

This book will provide you with a concrete understanding of what unconscious bias is, its impact in the workplace, and how you can address it.

Defining Unconscious Bias

What is unconscious bias and where did it come from?

01

In his seminal book on unconscious bias, Daniel Kahneman invites us to think of our brain as thinking in two different ways. The first way is our unconscious process. The second is when we think in a conscious way. Kahneman calls these System 1 and System 2.

He uses a classic riddle to illustrate this:

A bat and a ball cost £1.10 in total. The bat costs £1.00 more than the ball. How much does the ball cost?

Was your first reaction to think that the ball costs 10 cents? If so, that's your unconscious mind at work. It has jumped to what seems to be an obvious conclusion. However, when you start to think about it, you realise that that can't be the right solution, and your conscious brain kicks in to come up with the correct answer, which is 5 cents.

This is a great example of System 1 and 2 thinking for several reasons. You can see the pros and cons of each type of thinking straight away.

System 1 – our unconscious mind – is so quick we might not even be aware it's working. It jumps to conclusions based on information we've built up over a lifetime – this is often called intuition or a gut instinct. It is often emotional. If you often do the same kind of work, then there's a good chance your unconscious mind's assumptions will be right. There are several downsides. The first is that the brain stores away information regardless of whether it is true or false, right or wrong. Once the information is laid down in the brain, we act as if it is true. Another downside is that because we're not normally even

**Did you know…
We receive 11 million pieces of date from our environment every second. The human brain can only manage about 50 of those pieces of data.**

aware that we're jumping to conclusions and making split-second decisions based on those guesses, we are also not aware when we get them wrong. This, of course, can have huge consequences.

System 2 – our conscious mind – is slow and depends on deliberate logic. It takes a lot of energy to run it. It can feel like a struggle, and it can be hard to resist the temptation of just going with your gut. But the benefits are huge. One reward is the feeling of satisfaction when we achieve things or solve difficult problems. We also might think in different ways, have new ideas, and grow as people. The biggest reward is that decision-making will be vastly improved.

There's a place for both System 1 and System 2 thinking.
Your System 1 hunches are a good place to start, since there is a lot of information to sift through – we receive 11 million pieces of data from our environment every second, but can only manage about 50[1]; but then you should use your System 2 to check your hunches.

Based on all of this, we can now define unconscious bias.

A definition

I define unconscious bias as a filter, used to sift through a lifetime of information that we've gathered plus all the environmental data and triggers which we are taking in at any given moment; this filtering enables us to make quick decisions as to what action is necessary in a given situation. Our unconscious bias operates at such a high speed that we are, more often than not, unaware of doing this.

[1] Encyclopaedia Britannica - Information Theory

Making assumptions

Operating on this unconscious level, if we are unable or unwilling to scrutinise it, leads us to make assumptions. The information we use at the unconscious level has not been tested for veracity.

Some people call this 'instinct' or their 'gut feelings.' Whatever you call it, it means you are jumping to a conclusion based upon an unexamined thought process.

Where did it come from?

Having unconscious bias – that lightning fast filter that helps us makes quick decisions on what action to take – is a response to the uncertain and often threatening environment our ancestors would have faced thousands of years ago. When things are lurking in the shadows, it's best to assume danger, rather than have a laissez-faire attitude and end up being some ferocious animal's dinner. Because humans are social animals our survival strategy also relied upon knowing what group we belong to: we use unconscious bias to quickly make that assessment, and we do this by looking for similarities.

For those of us who still live in danger-filled environments, that unconscious bias will still serve the same purpose: to help us find safety and security. However, for many of us living in the West, we are still operating on a system that is reacting as if we were constantly on the look-out for life-threatening danger, when in fact, that is not often the case. In other words, the system reacts in a way that is out of proportion to the challenges most of us face, especially in the workplace.

Equally, in the past knowing which group you belonged with was one way to ensure your survival; for most of us living in the West today, and perhaps especially in the workplace, membership in a group may not seem as clearly connected to our physical survival as it was for our ancestors. However, in our world, safety isn't only physical, but emotional, social and psychological too. And on that level, this basic need to belong remains incredibly important:

> Research has shown the profound impacts social inclusion and exclusion have on how our brains function, suggesting a sense of belonging is actually vital for our survival. Such a legacy has made us acutely aware of other people's social needs, such as relatedness, status and fairness. [2]

Because humans are social animals our survival strategy also relied upon knowing what group we belong to: we use unconscious bias to quickly make that assessment, and we do this by looking for similarities.

These two things, then, impact how we seek safety and security as we move through our environment: how we filter information, and how we determine where we belong.

We will start by speaking a bit further about our sense of belonging, because it is the important basis upon which we build our biases about others.

[2] Cultures of inclusion

A Sense Of Belonging: In- And Out-Groups, Power And Systemic Inequality

In-groups and out-groups

02

A very simple definition of in-groups and out-groups is "us" and "them." The in-group ("us") has power; the out-group ("them") doesn't have power. The thing that complicates this simple idea is that we form a myriad of in- and out-groups on many different levels. There are societal in-and out-groups. We form in-and out-groups in the workplace, at home, with our peers, and so on.

For the purposes of this book, however, we'll just focus on societal in- and out-groups. The way to figure out which group of people has power in our society is to look at which groups need protection under the law.

Here in the UK, there are nine protected characteristics:
- age
- gender reassignment
- being married or in a civil partnership
- being pregnant or on maternity leave
- disability
- race including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin
- religion or belief
- sex
- sexual orientation

This tells you who society sees as needing protection – these are the out-groups. The group that – in general – doesn't need protection is therefore the in-group. In the UK, that in-group is white straight men,

How can I counter privilege in the workplace?

What should I do?
- Acknowledge that it exists
- Call it out – do you see a pattern in terms of which people are hired, for example?
- Educate yourself
- Take a privilege test (there's a good one here)
- Create inclusive in-groups

What should I avoid?
- Don't be defensive if you do have privilege
- Don't shut down conversations with those who are less privileged
- Denying that those with privilege have had advantages

who might be considered middle-aged, of a middle to upper class background, having attended certain public schools.

Power can be defined as having access to resources or capital. You will be familiar with financial capital which is money, but there are other types of capital too. For example, social capital is having status or access to a network of people. This is the idea of the "old boys network," which is alive and kicking:

> "A study by the London School of Economics, for example, found that alumni from the UK's nine leading public schools are 94 times more likely to reach the elite than those who attended other schools. This is despite the fact that those schools have traditionally educated fewer than one in 500 (0.15%) pupils aged between 13 and 18.
>
> Likewise, a study by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) in 2016 found that nearly a third of the UK's biggest companies largely rely on personal networks to identify new board members." [3]

[3] The real influence of the Old Boys Network
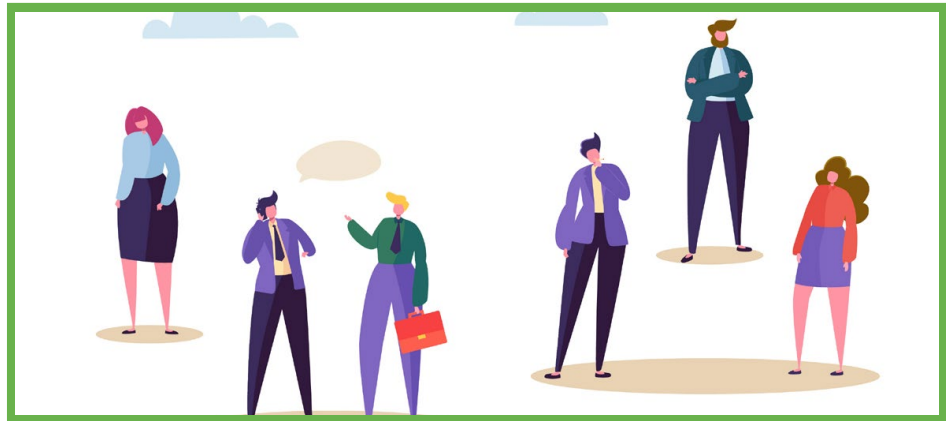
It is important to stress that this is very much about groups of people. There may very well be individuals in an out-group who have power; and there may be people who hold many in-group characteristics, but do not have any power. By no means does this mean that in-group members haven't worked hard in their lives or experienced hardship.

However, by being a member of an in-group, people will have access to benefits that people in the out-groups simply don't have.

This means that there is a system in place in our society that privileges the societal in-group and disadvantages the out-groups. This systemic inequality explains why you may not know anyone who discriminates against others, and you may not do so yourself. In fact, you might be the kind of person who would be an ally for out-group friends and colleagues. But, as long as the system is weighted in favour of the in-group, the in-group will benefit and be privileged in ways in which the out-groups don't and are not. In this sense, the actions of an individual, while very important, are not as important as changing the system:

"Privilege is not something I take and which therefore have the option of not taking. It is something that society gives me, and unless I change the institutions which give it to me, they will continue to give it, and I will continue to have it, however noble and equalitarian my intentions." [4]

In other words, regardless of whether individuals discriminate or not, our society does. Therefore, equality and raising awareness of unconscious bias in the workplace must be placed in a broader social context to give it meaning.

[4] Understanding White Privilege

Unconscious Bias and Systemic Inequality

Systemic inequality

To determine if there is systemic inequality, we have to examine whether the in-group receives benefits – in other words, whether it is privileged by society – and whether the out-groups face obstacles.

Privilege can be defined as unearned access to social power because of membership in a dominant social in-group.

For example, research carried out by Nuffield College's Centre for Social Investigation (and many, many other places), found that "British citizens from ethnic minority backgrounds have to send, on average, 60% more job applications to get a positive response from employers compared to their white counterparts." [5] This is what is meant by "unearned access" – simply by having what is considered as a white-sounding name, applicants receive more positive responses.

Typically, the in-group will have benefits such as:
- Being considered the "norm" (for example, disabled people are only disabled in a world built by able-bodied people for able-bodied people)
- Access to networks of people who have connections, influence and information (for instance, the "old boys' network")
- Being seen as who they are, and never having to validate:
    - Their identity (straight people will never have to think about how they might share their sexual identity and what the consequences might be)
    - Their status (a young CEO has to validate that they are a leader not an assistant, a woman who is a pilot or surgeon has to make it clear that she is in charge, not her male second-in-command)
    - Their knowledge (an older worker might be 100% tech-savvy, but people assume they're a "dinosaur"; a young woman who is a geologist is asked by male colleagues to fetch items from the supply cabinet)

[5] Why Your Name Matters in the Search for a Job

The out-group, on the other hand, will face obstacles such as:

- Being asked to conform to the "norm" (for example, being asked to change your name to something in-group members feel more comfortable with; to use the bathroom that conforms to your gender at birth)
- Not having access to networks of people who have connections, influence and information, and therefore having to work harder to achieve the same positions in organisations:
  - ▸ You have to apply to jobs via formal means, rather than through a personal introduction / recommendation
- Having to constantly validate and revalidate your identity, status and knowledge
- Being seen as a spokesperson for a group, and feeling an obligation to explain how that group thinks, as if it were a homogenous entity (one billion Indians, or 360 million Americans, or 65 million French people, will not all think identical thoughts, and therefore no one member of any of those groups can act as a spokesperson for their so-called "collective" identity)

As long as one group is given benefits in the shape of luck and a leg up, and other groups face obstacles, and therefore fall behind, then our society is not equal: we have systemic inequality. In this context, there cannot be a meritocracy, as a meritocracy can only exist in a completely equal society.

And of course systemic inequality plays out within companies as well. It is often stated that it is a meritocracy, and the perks of being an in-group member become invisible, so that their hard work and suitability for the role are given as the sole reasons for not having chosen an out-group member.

This can be seen in any number of workplace biases, but we'll look at four.

WHAT DOES BIAS LOOK LIKE IN THE WORKPLACE? HOW DOES IT IMPACT MANAGERS?

Common unconscious biases in the workplace

03

Affinity bias

An affinity bias is when people gravitate towards people they think are similar to themselves. We all have a tendency to do this, but we can work to counter it. In the workplace, affinity bias affects all aspects of the employee lifecycle. Years ago, I heard a story about a woman who was being interviewed for a job; when she was given the job, she was told it was because she looked like the interviewer's daughter.

Performance bias

Performance bias looks at two aspects of performance: potential and past performance. It is fine to judge people for roles based on either of these; the problems arise when some people are judged based on potential (an imaginary future) and others are judged based on their past performance. People will always see potential in other members of the in-group, thereby giving them a leg-up. People in the out-group will be judged by their past performance, and therefore will be given less opportunities, since the assumption is that they will do in the future what they have done in the past.

A classic example of this was when a mistake-heavy law memo was sent to a group of lawyers. The memos were all identical, but some had what is considered a white-sounding name on them; whilst others had what is considered a black-sounding name. In these studies,
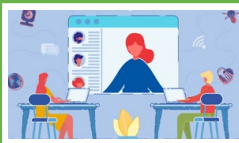
How can I avoid performance bias?
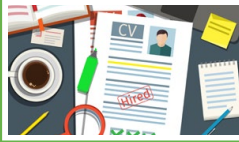
What should I do?

- Consider using blind recruitment
- Use a structured interview so that every applicant is judged on the same questions
- Make sure you compare candidates to the job specification, not each other

Don't assume that:

- Small talk is okay – for example, if you ask about their weekend and they say they went for a run, and you happen to be a runner, you've already marked them as an in-group member
- It's   a good idea to interview or review CVs by yourself; get input from other people

the "white" author is seen as having more potential and so mistakes are overlooked; the "black" author on the other hand received a lower grade on the memo because of the very same mistakes. [6]

Performance attribution bias
This bias relates to where an individual's success is seen to come from. For in-group members, people will see success as innate, as if the person were born with those skills. Because other people frequently tell them that it is their innate skill that has gotten them so far, these people tend to be overconfident and have more influence.

When members of the out-group have successes, they will be seen as something they got by luck, or having had a helping hand (for instance, being on an all-women shortlist), or even because they've worked very hard. The result is that these people don't get the same recognition for their work, and worst of all, they often believe that they don't deserve that recognition anyway – in other words, they suffer from imposter syndrome, and if their careers don't progress, it has become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

This internalised bias on the part of out-group members is apparent in research that has shown that "men tend to be comfortable applying for jobs when they meet 70% of the requirements, but women tend to apply for jobs where they meet 100%." [7]

> "men tend to be comfortable applying for jobs when they meet 70% of the requirements, but women tend to apply for jobs where they meet 100%."

[6] Managing Bias: Facebook Learning and Development

[7] Is My Recruitment Process Biased?

Parental bias

Nobody comes out of this one unscathed. Parental bias has an impact on fathers, mothers, and the child-free. Remember that these are unconscious biases and that most of the time, people are unaware that they are behaving in accordance with them. Flexible working is one of the central issues when speaking about this bias. The CIPD, in a 2019 report, found that "Women are more likely to use flexible working arrangements than men as are the youngest and oldest age groups and people with dependent children (compared with those without dependent children)." [8] This may be because of long-existing cultural norms about women being care-givers; it maybe about the stigma some men feel about flexible working.

Men:
- You have to be BOTH a good father and a good employee – if you take parental leave, it's because you want to do neither
- Your performance will be assessed differently – you're still expected to do well at work, and go the extra mile

Once again, the fact that legislation has been enacted to give men more time off – consider that men used to get no time off for a new child – tells us that the unspoken expectation (or bias) is that he should be able to do both. He should be able to do whatever caring for his new-born that he needs to while continuing to put in 100% at work. Imagine the pressure this puts on men. Men who ask for flexible working often face disapproval.

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[8] Mega Trends: Flexible Working

Women:

- You can't be a good mother AND a good employee – you have to choose (you focus either 100% on motherhood OR on work)
- Therefore, your performance will be assessed differently – you might be given a less challenging workload / opportunities

For women, it is the opposite. Women coming back from maternity leave are often given less significant or weighty projects. There is an unspoken expectation that they'd really rather be at home with their children. And, if they do push for the interesting or in-depth projects or work, some people will ask themselves, "what kind of mother is she?"

Child-Free:

- Why are you asking for flex-time? Can't you stay late since you haven't got kids?

Finally, for those who haven't yet had children or who don't want to or can't have children, there is an unspoken expectation that they will pick up the slack; that if need be they can be at work early or late (when parents are dropping off or picking up their children from school), or that they will be there during half term or other school holidays, which parents take off.

How can I counter parental bias?
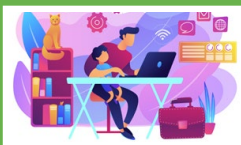
What should I do?

- Work to de-stigmatise men taking parental leave
- Encourage flex-time for men, if they want it
- Value the work of those in part-time roles equally to those who work full-time
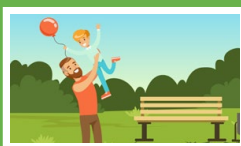
Don't assume that:

- Women returning from maternity leave don't want weighty projects – ask!
- Men with children want to come back full-time – ask!
- Flexible working should only be available to those with caring duties outside work

How do these biases impact your work as a manager?

Are you one of the managers who openly admit they hire people just like themselves? If so, you'd be one of the 29% of senior managers who do. [9] This research didn't address the number who don't admit it, or don't realise they're doing it – a difficult number to measure.

In general, if people are not aware of their own unconscious biases, they will recruit, hire, promote, mentor and sponsor people with whom they have an affinity (affinity bias). They will have more rapport with the person – if you think about how important sense of belonging is, then rapport is one of the best ways to establish if someone fits in. But rapport – much like instinct and gut feelings – are just sneaky synonyms for unconscious bias, and as we've seen, it can contribute to poor decision-making. It will almost always lead you to choose the person who seems to "fit" rather than the person who might be best for the role. All of these words – rapport, instinct, gut feelings, culture fit – are code for "they're not like me."

People who are unaware of their bias will see someone with whom they have rapport as having more potential (performance bias), and they will see their success as coming from their own innate talent. Rather than seeing this as stemming from bias, they will tend to argue that the workplace is a meritocracy and that they have simply chosen the best person for the job. Yet, the reality is that they will have chosen someone with whom it's easy for them to get along. Why? Because they seem to be just like themselves. They may have the same values, the same background. They may have gone

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[9] 4 Practical Steps to Reduce Unconscious Bias in the Workplace

How can I avoid culture fit?

What should I do?

- Match people to their abilities to carry out the job, not to whether they'll get along
- Create inclusive criteria for membership in the workplace
- Value dissent and managed conflict

Don't assume that:

- If you like someone they'll be a good addition to your team
- Dissent and managed conflict are bad – they're not; in fact, they can contribute to innovation and improved decision-making

The right person for the job is the one who can perform the role best, regardless of whether you personally like them or not.

to the same schools and universities. In other words, they will be functioning on the same set of assumptions, based on those shared values and experiences.

The problem with this is that just because you get along with someone, doesn't mean that they are the right person for the job. The right person for the job is the one who can perform the role best, regardless of whether you personally like them or not. You can of course expect people to be professional and team-players; this is not identical to having to like everyone you work with.

Additionally, someone who is different to you may challenge your unconscious assumptions, which can lead you to question things you have always taken for granted – you may find yourself having new ideas and approaches to workplace issues. You may even find that someone you assumed you didn't like because they were dissimilar to you might grow on you.

THE RETURN ON INVESTMENT

What is the Return on Investment?

04

It is sometimes hard to measure the positive impact of addressing unconscious bias, because what is essentially being measured is a vacuum – what your organisation could have if it were to address bias.

The business case for addressing unconscious bias can be outlined as follows:

- Introduce dissent: difference of opinion leads to critical thinking and innovation
- Improvements: Diversity supersedes ability as a driver to finding innovative solutions to business problems – but be aware that innovation is rare, and that the best ideas often lead to great improvements
- Improved Customer Service: Engaged staff engage positively with customers.
- Diverse staff attract diverse customers. The number of people who can become clients increases.
- Helps to optimise employee potential, which is win-win
- Contribute to a better society: people take home what they learn at work and it'll spread – small changes make big differences
- Fair Treatment of all: this one's simple - you'll have less grievances, discrimination claims, and staff turnover

People have also tried to measure the impact that unconscious bias has on individuals within the workplace. One piece of research found that employees who are impacted by bias are:

- Three times as likely (31% to 10%) to say that they're planning to leave their current jobs within the year
- Nearly three times as likely (20% vs 7%) to be disengaged at work
- 2.6 times more likely (34% to 13%) to say that they've withheld ideas and market solutions over the previous six months [10]

Other research indicates the risk of failing to address unconscious bias and its consequences in terms of diversity within the workplace. The MacGregor-Smith report found that if there were full representation of BAME (black, Asian, minority, ethnic) individuals in the UK job market, it would create a sizeable benefit to the UK economy. Through increasing the participation and improving opportunities for progression for a diverse workforce, that potential benefit was estimated to be £24 billion a year, or 1.3% of GDP. [11]

Last but not least, addressing unconscious bias is an essential contributor in better decision-making. Homogenous groups are susceptible to groupthink and other biases, while diverse teams can access a greater variety of perspectives and therefore are likely to solve problems faster. [12]

**Did you know that…
According to the MacGregor-Smith report, the potential benefit of full representation of BAME individuals in the UK job market could be £24 billion per year.**

[10] New Data Reveals the Hard Costs of Bias and How to Disrupt It

[11] The McGregor-Smith Report: Race in the Workplace

[12] The Mix That Matters: Innovation Through Diversity

TIPS FOR DE-BIASING YOUR DECISION-MAKING

How to de-bias your management decisions

05

The three best ways to de-bias your decision-making are to create and rigorously stick to checklists; try to disprove your gut feelings and hypotheses about decisions so as to avoid confirmation bias; and do pre-mortems. A pre-mortem is an exercise where you imagine the worst possible way your decision could turn out, and detail all the steps you'd need to take to get to that worst possible outcome. You then look at that list to see if you're currently doing any of those things.

As an example of what a de-biased people process might look like, let's look at some tips and strategies for de-biasing interviews of new candidates.
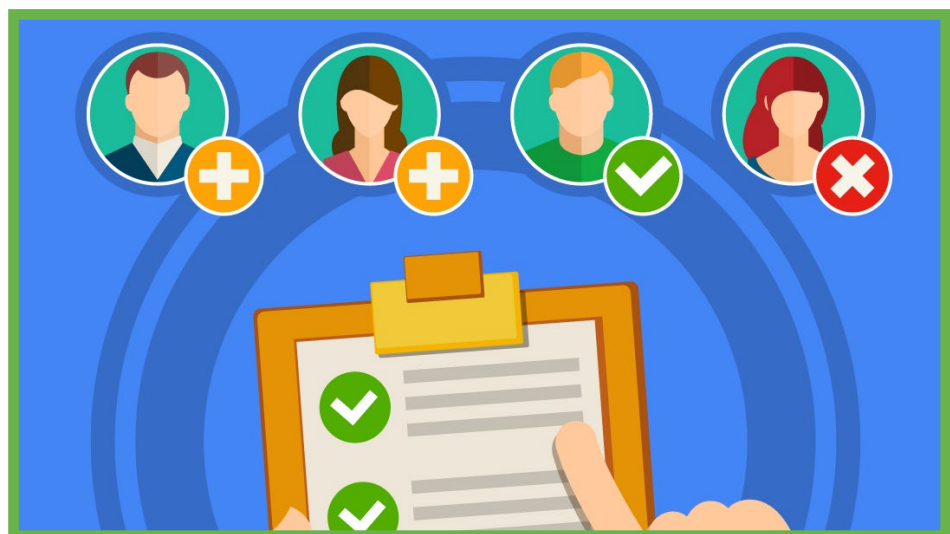
Before the Interview

1. Use a scripted interview: decide which questions or competencies are based on potential or past performance, and then judge everyone the same way
2. Have at least 2 or 3 people on your interview team. Even better, have each person interview the candidate and assess them separately.
3. Include other aspects, beyond the interview: for example, presentations, tests, psychometrics, and any other activities relevant to the role
4. Be clear on the criteria for the job beforehand
5. Think about where you're likely to jump to conclusions
   - Show what is objectively true about a candidate, rather than your gut feeling
   - Try to identify your feelings (vs. your thoughts) and where they might come from (does the candidate remind you of someone you know?)
   - Ask others for their observations of your behaviours in this area
   - What stereotypes do you hold that might impact your decisions?
   - Try an Implicit Association Test (Google "Harvard IAT" to find them)
6. Make sure you're well-rested, relaxed and in the right frame frame of mind!

During the Interview

1. Have someone else, who is not involved in interviewing, pick up the candidate from reception and bring them to the interview
2. Check your generalisations – are you assessing through either the Horns or Halo Effect?
3. Write down both the highlights and your reservations about each candidate
4. Make a note of which people you instantly feel at ease with, and those who make you uncomfortable: look for patterns and outliers (pay attention to your body language in both situations)
5. Note your first impression
6. Note your last impression at the end of the interview
7. It's tempting to compare each candidate against the previous interviewee. But don't give in! Take a break between candidates instead. Compare them against the job role / spec.
8. Independently score each individual against your pre-determined criteria; have an overall rating and summary; then share at the end – so you can't influence each other's thoughts.

After the Interview

1. Have each individual on the interviewing team clearly articulate their opinions in writing before comparing notes (rules out groupthink and sunflower bias)
2. Counter your first impression: if you disliked a candidate, look for all the positive facts about them. If you liked the candidate, look for the negative facts about them.
3. After you make your notes, it's a good idea to wait until at least the next day before coming to any decisions (in other words, reflect!)
4. Interview against the job, not comparing the candidates
5. If in doubt, don't hire – think twice, do more research, interview more people

Add your tips here to share with others…

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CONCLUSION

It's important to remember that unconscious bias is an ancient tool, which helped our ancestors to survive in a threatening and truly dangerous world. For most of us in the West, and certainly a majority of us in the workplace, this ancient tool can easily lead us to react in a way which is out of proportion to whatever it is we may face at work, exacerbating relations between people, and negatively impacting upon our ability to make good decisions.

Therefore, helping people to become aware of unconscious bias is not just a "nice to have." As it is ultimately about improving each individual's decision-making abilities, it should contribute to the bedrock of organisational strategy. Improvements to diversity and inclusion will be a built-in benefit – rather than an add-on – once decisions around recruitment, career progression, succession, parental leave, and so on are de-biased.

Countering a system so intrinsic to being human as unconscious bias is a big task; as such, it's not something any organisation can accomplish overnight. However, if strategies to address unconscious bias are embedded within organisational culture and each individual employee is tasked with addressing their own bias and calling out the bias of others, we can slowly start to chip away at the problems that bias causes.

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