Learn: What is Unconscious Bias?

Unconscious bias (also known as implicit bias) is an attitude someone has — either positive or negative — without being aware of it. Unconscious biases are developed over the course of someone's life, and result from exposure to other people and the media. Usually, these assumptions drive people's actions.

People can hold unconscious biases about many things, but they are often about race, gender, age, sexual orientation and religion. And these biases are pervasive. (Check out this video for more information.)

Let's look at two examples:

Unconscious Bias in Health Care

Unconscious bias in health care can take many forms, including how a doctor interacts with a patient, the level to which a patient's symptoms are believed, and recommended treatment plans.

The Kirwan Institute has elevated many studies on these topics, highlighting doctors' personal perceptions that they do not hold any explicit bias toward people based on race, gender and other characteristics. However, one report found that two-thirds of the doctors in a study were found to have an implicit bias against Black people and Latinos – a bias that showed up in how the doctor communicated with the patient and whether the doctor showed concern. This unconscious bias affected the care patients received, with doctors in some cases recommending different treatment plans based on the patients' race or gender.

Similarly, a 2012 study published in the American Journal of Public Health found that pediatricians' unconscious biases about race led to inconsistent treatment recommendations for patients suffering from pain after surgery. In this case, doctors prescribed pain medication less often to Black patients compared to white patients.

Unconscious Bias in the Workplace

A recent LinkedIn Learning module offers common examples of unconscious bias in the workplace:

- **Affinity bias:** a positive response to people who are similar to us

- **Halo effect:** admiring all of a person's actions because of past praiseworthy actions

- **Perception bias:** stereotypes and assumptions about certain groups that make it difficult to be objective about individual members of those groups

- **Confirmation bias:** seeking out evidence that confirms initial perceptions, ignoring contrary information

- **Group think:** when seeking harmony or conformity in the group results in incorrect decision-making

These types of unconscious bias show up in different ways in the workplace. A good example is

José Zamora's job-hunting experience highlighted in this Huffington Post article. José sent out 50-100 resumes a day during his job search and received no response. So as an experiment, he dropped the "s" in his name and applied as Joe Zamora – and suddenly his inbox was full.

A study from the National Bureau of Economic Research reports similar findings. In their study, researchers responded to job postings with fake resumes and measured the number of callbacks each resume received. The experience listed would be similar between the resumes, but half would be assigned names that would likely be perceived as white (such as Emily Walsh or Greg Baker) and the other half would be assigned names that would likely be perceived as Black (such as Lakisha Washington or Jamal Jones). The result? Resumes with names that would be perceived as white received 50% more callbacks. The researchers also noted that, based on their estimates, *"a white name yields as many more callbacks as an additional eight years of experience."*

Not acknowledging our own unconscious biases negatively impacts ourselves, our relationships and our organizations. It is important to examine our own unconscious biases and work to eliminate them through education and reflection.

Reflect: Identifying Biases Within Your Organization

Has your organization explored the topic of unconscious bias?

Are there opportunities within your organization to introduce the topic of unconscious bias and have team discussions about it?

How could unconscious biases negatively impact your organization, teammates or employees?

What actions can you take today to address unconscious bias in yourself and your organization?

Change: Steps Toward Progress

Assess what unconscious biases exist in your organization

- Encourage leaders and employees to explore their unconscious biases through tools like Harvard's Implicit Association Test. (Individuals can also find relevant resources about this topic here).

Implement unconscious bias training programs throughout your organization

- Check out resources like the Kirwan Institute's implicit bias training series. Encourage your senior leadership team to work through the training together, as well as roll it out to the broader organization.

Encourage and support courageous conversations throughout the organization

- This work will be challenging, and it is important for people – particularly white people – to lean into the discomfort they may feel as they learn more about these issues.

- Having courageous conversations with peers is an integral step in an organizations acknowledging and moving past unconscious biases.

- It will be critical that these conversations encourage vulnerability and openness.

- Equally as important is that these conversations do not put marginalized employees and leaders in a situation that will exacerbate stress and trauma.

    - Employees who identify as BIPOC, LGBTQ+, women and those with a disability will have likely been on the receiving end of these biases, so it may create stress for them to process these biases alongside folks who are learning about them for the first time.

    - We recommend introducing the topic of unconscious bias broadly, encouraging employees to learn more and identify their own unconscious biases, and creating a "build your own training" platform to meet people where they are at developmentally.

Learn More
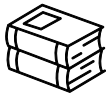
- "Unconscious Bias" from LinkedIn Learning

- "Project Implicit" from Harvard University

- "Combatting Racial Bias in the Workplace" by the Kirwan Institute

- "Blindspot – Hidden Biases of Good People" by Mahzarin R. Banaji and Anthony G. Greenwald

bluecrossmn.com/healthequity

BlueCross BlueShield
Minnesota