Unconscious Bias: From Awareness to Action!

Did you know that we all have unconscious bias, and that we each have a responsibility to prevent its unintended consequences? In this course, we will explore unconscious bias in the workplace and the actions you can take to lessen its impact. Although we know unconscious bias affects all aspects of our lives, for this course we will primarily be focusing on workplaces.

Part of learning about unconscious bias is realizing that our brains are capable of making assumptions and creating mental shortcuts without us even being aware.
Also called implicit bias.

Personal story

We aren't here to judge, or say that one thing is right and the other is wrong. Bias is our nature, not our destiny - it makes us human.

We all have preferences. It can be as simple as "I prefer chocolate ice cream to vanilla ice cream," or "I prefer tea to coffee." Or we may have a preference to associate with people who share our "group identity," whether that identity is rooted in our race, gender, ethnicity, or religion, to name a few.

Neuroscientists have found that our brains easily sort "us" from "them." This categorization is almost immediate. And although it is a natural neurological process, it is also the basis for harmful stereotypes.

We define stereotypes as widely held and oversimplified images or ideas about a person or group. The problem with this kind of quick categorization is that it's based on the assumption that all people of a particular group are the same - for example, that all people who wear glasses are smart.

Over time, our stereotypes can become automatic associations - or what we call unconscious biases. They are formed by the culture around us, history, the media, movies, TV, our religions, and our own communities. Their formation starts early (as early as five years old) and happens in much the same way as you develop habits. If you put your mobile phone and keys on the bedside table every night, that behavior will become automatic. If your culture associates men with being better at math or the media shows women as better at nurturing, over a lifetime that association becomes automatic as well.

Catalyst has been researching the critical role of inclusion in overcoming the barriers of unconscious bias in the workplace. While diversity is about differences, inclusion is getting those differences to work together effectively. Each of us can create a sense of inclusion by making our colleagues feel valued for their differences, rather than uncomfortably conscious of them, and ensure that everyone feels they belong to the team and are part of the "in-group." No matter what your level in your organization, you can be a leader and help to create the kind of work culture that drives results through inclusion.
Well, unconscious bias reinforces exclusion. A sense of feeling left out or feeling like an “other.” I think we’ve all had these experiences, either at work, at school, or in other social settings. Feeling like an outsider is a powerful feeling. Sometimes it’s blatant and obvious. Sometimes it’s more subtle. In this way, unconscious biases can create cultural norms that end up creating what we call in-groups and out-groups.

Taking Action

“Awareness is vital—but awareness alone is rarely effective for change.”

Learning Skills by Changing Habits

We will break down each skill into a series of positive habits that you can develop and easily continue after finishing this course. Putting into action both of these skills, and their subsequent steps and habits, can build a culture that interrupts the impact of unconscious bias all while creating innovative and inclusive workplaces where employees can advance and thrive.

Every day we make countless decisions based on assumptions on everything from what to wear (“It’s August in New York; I assume it will be hot today”), to who to meet for a coffee break (“Leonard is 30 years older than me; I assume we won’t have a lot to talk about, so I’ll hang out with Jose”), and much more. For many of these decisions, we rely on our past experiences, the information we’ve heard from other people, or just the hazy concept of “trusting our gut.” Trusting our gut is a shorthand way to process what we may have encountered in past experiences, and allows us to make quick decisions. This can be helpful at times when logic may not be needed, such as swerving your car to avoid an animal crossing the
road, or other such times when stakes are low and the outcome of your decisions will not negatively impact others.

But what happens when our gut is wrong?

Without logic as a part of our decision-making, we run the risk of introducing bias into the process. In the workplace especially, these decisions can have a significant impact on our colleagues and teammates. Sometimes, who succeeds at work depends on it. So what can we do to “check our gut”? To begin with, we have to be willing to unlearn some of what we assume to be correct and be open to learning some new habits.

1) There are many situations that may cause us to resort to automatic or biased thinking (“trusting our gut”), such as being distracted, feeling exhausted, facing a deadline, or perhaps wanting to agree with a group. We can all acknowledge that in some workplace instances, making quick decisions is critical. But even emergency room doctors or pilots running into turbulence have a system in place—a checklist to help make swift decisions objectively. In many situations, we too can consciously and mindfully take that pause and slow it down and take a more methodical approach.

Note: The busier we are and the more information and tasks we try to juggle, the more likely we are to turn to automatic or unconscious thinking.

2) Step 1: Create a list of challenging questions that will help you get to the root causes of emotions or “instincts” you may have about a person or a situation.

Step 2: Write down instances where you realize your evidence is weak or misleading and note any gaps in your knowledge or understanding.

Step 3: Ask yourself whether you are using objective criteria for the decision. If not, create it.

Once you have made time to think, you will want to dig deeper and look past the unconscious biases that might otherwise inform your decision. The best way to do this is to ask questions specifically designed to test your own assumptions. The questions can be wide-ranging and dig into assumptions you may have about people, situations, and certain jobs or tasks.

When doing this exercise, take note of your own responses and reactions. Identify where and how you’re getting information that may be impacting your decision-making. Identify areas where you may be filling in knowledge gaps with assumptions. Pay attention to the small things. This exercise might get uncomfortable, but it’s important to be honest with yourself and look deeply into your immediate responses. Next are some questions to start your check for assumptions.

3) Step 1: Talk to people inside and outside of your usual circles.

Step 2: Have a conversation with the people actually impacted.

This next habit involves testing assumptions by getting the perspective of other people to fill in those missing gaps. To do this, you’ll want to talk with colleagues outside of your usual network who may have had different experiences with a particular co-worker or situation. Also, don’t forget to have a conversation with the people actually impacted by the decision itself. For example, women sometimes are not considered for international assignments because the assumption is they won’t choose to move due to family obligations. But we need to remember to ask and not assume.

1. Slow it down
2. Question and challenge your thinking
3. Get input from other people

What to do?

1. Have more inclusive meetings
2. Check your words
   - Flip the script
   - Pay attention, Question yourself, ask for help

1. How exactly do you get the viewpoint of someone outside your usual circle? How do you make people comfortable enough to provide the opposing viewpoint or solicit the opinion of the quiet person? One way is to be sure your meetings are designed to be more inclusive. We have all sat in a meeting where one or two people dominate the floor, making the conversations exclusionary. Cultural differences too can make it very hard for individuals to speak up or “take up space” in the way a member of the in-group might do. It’s one thing to attend a meeting and another to have a voice at that meeting. Hearing all the voices not only helps to mitigate unconscious bias from decisions but also will help your meeting find.
potentially more innovative solutions.

2. The words we choose can reinforce stereotypes, which can lead to unconscious-biased thinking. Becoming aware of the power of our words and using inclusive language is a new habit we can all work on. Use this Flip the Script tool to replace statements that limit people and reinforce bias with what to say instead.

Flip the script
Pay attention: Is the language you use different for women and men?
Question yourself: Are you unintentionally holding women to a higher standard?
Ask for help: Ask someone you trust to review your work for gendered language.