

## Let's Chat about – Unconscious Bias



We make decisions every day without even realising it. Reading this, you're making decisions. Decisions about the content, the questions being asked of you. How we think and act is influenced by both societal and cognitive bias, and it impacts you more than you may think.

### What is “unconscious bias”?

Bias is an inclination or prejudice for or against one person or group or thing. So, unconscious biases are unconscious feelings we have towards other people or things– instinctive feelings that play a strong part in influencing our judgements away from being balanced or even-handed.

A cognitive bias is a systematic error in thinking - part of our brain's hardwiring - that causes us to act repeatedly in an illogical way.

Biases affects us and our decision-making processes in several different ways:

- **Our perception** – how we see people and information and perceive reality.
- **Our attitude** – how we react towards certain people.
- **Our behaviours** – how receptive/friendly we are towards certain people.
- **Our attention** – which aspects of a person or what information we pay most attention to.
- **Our listening and processing skills** – how much we actively listen to what certain people say and how much concentration and thought we give to certain types of information or situation.
- **Our micro-affirmations** – how much or how little we acknowledge, support, and validate certain people in certain situations.

## Common forms of bias

There are biases that easily come to mind which we know are prevalent in UK society. Such as gender bias, age bias, racial bias. These are important to recognise and understand. There is plenty of literature you can find online to explore those biases in more detail. However, here are some other biases to consider:

### ATTRIBUTION BIAS

The fundamental attribution error (also known as correspondence bias or over-attribution effect) is the tendency for people to over-emphasise character, or personality-based explanations, for behaviours observed in others while under-emphasising situational explanations. In other words, people have a cognitive bias to assume that a person's actions depend on what "kind" of person that person is rather than on the social and environmental forces that influence the person.

Be aware that we tend to do the opposite with ourselves, looking for situational explanations to save our self-esteem. E.g. If Kendra's project is late then it must be because she is lazy; if my project is late it is because I had all this extra work | I wasn't sleeping well | My dog ate the presentation! Etc etc

Make sure you are finding out what others are experiencing before you judge or hold someone to account.

### AFFINITY BIAS

Affinity bias, also known as similarity bias, is the tendency of people to favour others who share similar interests, experiences and backgrounds. It can also extend to those you feel are a 'fit' with roles or workplace expectations based on what you have seen before or arbitrary criteria based on your own values.

This can most often arise in recruitment and in deciding who works with you, who you sit with, or to whom you assign the key projects.

Ensure you are considering 'cultural add' not culture fit when recruiting or assigning work. Use objective selection criteria to measure potential candidates for hire or assignments. Observe, record, classify (against those objective criteria) and then evaluate, don't go on gut instinct.

And, whether you are a manager or not, consider what impact your bias may have on how welcome and included someone feels in your team and ensure you are acting in an inclusive way.

### CONFIRMATION BIAS

Confirmation bias is the inclination see only evidence that supports your pre-existing beliefs. We tend to listen more often to information that confirms the beliefs they already have.

Instead of considering all the facts in a logical and rational manner, people tend simply to look for things that reinforce what they already think is true. In many cases, people on two sides of an issue can listen to the same story, and each will walk away with a different interpretation that they feel validates their existing point of view.

Make sure you are challenging yourself to look for the 'other' side or view point, and search for information you may have missed, for example by looking at different sources than the single source of information you usually use.

## **CONFORMITY BIAS**

This is the tendency of people to behave like those around them rather than using their own personal judgment.

Human beings are programmed to want to fit in. Because of this, our views and opinions are swayed by other people as we try to conform with the group. It is often described as 'group think'.

Be particularly aware of this in recruitment exercises and ensure your interview panel members reach their own individual assessments before sharing with the group, and be ready to put forward your thinking and reasoning and challenge that of others if there are differences of opinion.

In making team decisions about projects or funding, ensure the team slows down the decision-making process to look at all options, weigh the pros and cons, listen to all voices and not just the loudest.

## **ANCHORING BIAS**

Anchoring bias occurs when people rely too much on pre-existing information and especially the first information they find when making decisions.

For example, if the first suit you see in a store is £1000, you are more likely to think the £500 suit is a bargain, even if it still represents bad value for money.

This is also true of data or your assessment of people in the workplace. For example, if Kendra asks you for a salary raise of £3000 but you think this is too much, you may settle on what you think is a more reasonable offer of £2000. However, if you had not had a benchmark of Kendra's initial starting point of £3000, your assessment of performance may have led you to think she only deserves another £1000 per year. This could lead to disparities in pay within the team, particularly if other team members are not so bold in their ask as Kendra.

Always slow down and question how you reached a decision – is it based on evidenced fact or merit, or have I been influenced by the first bit of data seen?

## **NEGATIVITY BIAS**

People have a natural bias towards negative situations. This is a natural defence mechanism that helps us remember and avoid dangerous situations.

However, negativity bias can also get in the way of our professional development. Instead of learning from constructive feedback, it can induce stress, fear or anger.

Seek to develop an open mindset to feedback, ask for feedback and welcome it so you can learn and grow from it and be more open to hear the positive feedback too.

As a manager, provide regular feedback and coaching to team members so that praise and comments on improvements needed are a natural and normal part of your relationship, not a one off at annual appraisals or only given when something is wrong.