



EQUAL AT WORK

Manager Guide

Unconscious Bias

What is unconscious bias?

Unconscious bias refers to the automatic assumptions our brains make without us realising. Everyone has unconscious bias. It is formed over time through our experiences, habits, upbringing and exposure to social norms. These mental shortcuts help us process information quickly, but they can influence workplace decisions in unintended ways, particularly when people rely on instinct or make decisions under pressure.

Unconscious bias is most likely to influence decisions made quickly, informally, or decisions based on instinct.

How the brain shapes bias

Unconscious bias is linked to how the brain works. Our brain's respond quickly to familiarity or perceived risk, and draws on past experiences and stored memories to make sense of situations. This often happens before the part of our brain that controls deliberate and rational thinking has time to engage.

Bias is also shaped by repeated messages over time. For example, many people grew up seeing men portrayed as leaders, doctors or scientists, while women were shown in caring or domestic roles. Even when we no longer agree with these messages, they can still influence our unconscious assumptions if left unchecked.

Common types of unconscious bias

Unconscious bias tends to follow familiar patterns, particularly in how we assess, include, or make decisions about others, such as those listed below:

- **Affinity Bias** - tendency to warm to people who are more like us
- **Gender Bias** - preferring one gender over another
- **Racial/Cultural Bias** - favouring certain races/cultures over others
- **Age Bias** - making assumptions about ability based on age
- **Conformity Bias** - changing our views to match the group
- **Confirmation Bias** - only seeking information that supports our existing beliefs
- **Beauty Bias** - favouring more "attractive" people
- **The Halo Effect** - when one good trait influences all our judgment about someone
- **The Horns Effect** - when one negative trait clouds our judgment of someone

The impact of unconscious bias

Unconscious bias can relate to factors such as ethnicity, gender, age, accent, sexual orientation, or family responsibilities.

When left unchecked, unconscious bias can create unintended advantages or disadvantages and may lead to unfair outcomes, exclusion and, in some cases, unlawful discrimination.

Unconscious bias often shows up unintentionally in the small, everyday choices we don't stop to question

Where unconscious bias can show up

Unconscious bias often appears in everyday workplace interactions and decisions, sometimes in subtle ways that can be easy to overlook.

- Recruitment and selection decisions
- Performance assessments and perceptions of potential
- Promotion and succession planning
- Access to learning, development, and stretch opportunities
- Day-to-day task allocation and workload distribution
- Meeting dynamics, including who speaks, who is heard, and whose ideas are valued
- Informal conversations, assumptions, and “off-hand” comments

Tips to tackle unconscious bias

While unconscious bias is a natural part of being human, there are practical steps people can take to reduce its negative impact on everyday decisions and workplace outcomes.

- **Acknowledge that bias exists:** recognising that everyone has unconscious bias is the first step to managing it..
- **Pause and slow down decisions:** bias is more likely to influence quick or “gut instinct” decisions.
- **Be curious:** ask questions and seek additional information before forming conclusions.
- **Use clear and consistent criteria:** particularly for decisions relating to recruitment, promotion, and performance.
- **Seek diverse perspectives:** involve others to challenge blind spots and broaden thinking.
- **Reflect on patterns:** notice who gets opportunities, feedback, or visibility, and who may be missing out.
- **Use inclusive language and behaviours:** small everyday interactions can reinforce feeling of inclusion or exclusion.
- **Create safe opportunities for feedback:** encourage people to speak up if something doesn't feel fair.

Quick self-check

Unconscious bias is often shaped by routine habits rather than intent, and reflecting on questions like these can help identify patterns that may otherwise go unnoticed:

- Is it always the same people speaking up in meetings?
- When was the last time you had coffee with someone different at work?
- Are part-time workers considered when organising meetings or social events?
- If there's an urgent task, who do you go to first?
- Am I making an assumption or relying on facts?
- Who hasn't had the same opportunity to be seen?
- Is it the same people attending social events? Why might this be?

**We can't eliminate unconscious bias
but we can create habits that reduce its impact**