Five types of unconscious biases and how to fight them
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We all wish we could free our minds from bias and reason with perfect objectivity, but that is simply not possible. The human brain is wired to process data into patterns and make assumptions. In the best circumstances, this propensity allows us to learn from our experiences and make quick decisions, but it also makes us vulnerable to unconscious bias, especially in the context of HR and recruitment, where complex conclusions must be drawn from limited sources of information like a resume or a 45-minute interview.

If left unchecked, the cumulative effect of unconscious bias can be disastrous. Not only can it close off your organisation from important opportunities; it can also erode employee morale and lead to toxic work environments. That’s why it’s important to acknowledge unconscious bias in all its forms and take active measures to mitigate its effects. To that end, here are five types of unconscious biases and how to fight them.

1. Affinity bias

What it is

Simply put, like likes like. We all tend to gravitate toward people who are similar to ourselves. Affinity bias occurs when we let this tendency affect our judgment. For example, when making hiring or promotion decisions, some managers might be tempted to favor candidates who grew up in the same town or went to the same school as they did. This unconscious bias becomes particularly problematic when the affinity touches on race, gender, age, sexual orientation, or any other protected basis.

How to fight it

A more structured approach can help reduce the impact of affinity bias. When filling a position or making any work-related decision, take the time to set quantifiable goals and benchmarks that reflect your operational needs, and base your final judgment on these objective metrics rather than gut instinct. Managers looking to recruit new talent should use structured application forms and prepare interview questions in advance. The objective is to keep the focus on the criteria you carefully selected before affinity bias could come into play.
2. Confirmation bias

What it is

One of the most common sources of logical fallacies, confirmation bias describes our tendency to look for information that confirms our original point of view rather than draw our conclusions from all of the evidence available. For instance, a recruiter might become enamored with a candidate after reading their resume and then ignore all signs of a bad match during the interview. This bias goes hand in hand with the first impression bias, also known as “anchoring”, which is when we base our decisions on the first piece of information available without examining whether it provides an adequate frame of reference.

How to fight it

The best way to counter confirmation bias is to implement measures to challenge your point of view. Whenever possible, make decisions as a team, and make sure to surround yourself with a diverse group of people who aren’t afraid to speak their minds. Data-driven behavioral assessments can help you gather and develop such a workforce, but remember that a team-based approach can only work if you yourself remain receptive to dissenting opinions.

3. Recency bias

What it is

Even though the full picture comprises all of one’s actions and results over time, our minds tend to attribute more importance to recent events than to prior ones. This phenomenon is known as recency bias, and it is particularly prevalent in employee evaluations, where workers are often judged according to their latest accomplishment or misstep instead of their overall performance. This can lead to the wrong people being promoted or to innovative thinkers limiting their input for fear that any small miscalculation might overshadow years of accomplishments.

How to fight it

Recency bias can be significantly mitigated by keeping written records of all progress and feedback so that you can reference them when making decisions instead of going by memory or impression. Also make sure to base performance reviews and promotions on overall skills and aptitudes rather than recent occurrences. HR tools like the SuccessFinder Ladder of Leadership can provide you with comprehensive behavioral data to help you objectively identify potential leaders and high performers in your workforce.
4. Attribution bias

What it is

Attribution bias refers to our tendency to blame external factors for our own actions but assume that the behavior of others is solely the result of their personality. For example, a manager might miss a deadline and attribute it to a last-minute shift in priorities, but then call other team members lazy when they submit their work late. This bias is particularly dangerous when coupled with affinity bias, as it can lead to discriminatory work environments where employees of a different background are judged more harshly than the rest.

How to fight it

Self-reflection is key to combatting the effects of attribution bias. Before passing judgment, ask yourself:

- Are you looking at the situation objectively?
- Have you considered every factor?
- Would you feel the same if the roles were reversed?

As with confirmation bias, a team-based approach is recommended. When a situation arises, give everyone a chance to express their perspective, and make sure to contemplate your own behavior.

5. Prejudice

What it is

Not all prejudices are expressed outwardly or even consciously, but they can affect our decision-making just the same. For example, after decades of exposure to related stereotypes, a manager could develop the “gut impression” that people who look or dress a certain way struggle with authority or don’t work as hard. Whether by peers, the media, or other cultural influences, we have all been socially conditioned to interpret the world in certain ways, but it’s important to remember that these paradigms are not always accurate, and they certainly don’t apply to every individual.
How to fight it

In order to prevent a toxic work environment, it is imperative that you take an active stance against prejudice, especially concerning protected bases like race, gender, age, and sexual orientation. Develop clear written policies to consistently resolve discrimination issues, and communicate with your team regularly so that you can proactively address any burgeoning concern. It is also important to set diversity, inclusion, and equity goals for your organisation. A more diverse workforce lowers the chances of a prejudicial culture rooting itself in the workplace and brings a number of benefits, including:

- Wider range of skills and perspectives available
- Higher level of creativity in problem-solving
- Increased employee engagement and retention rates

Enhance your decisions

Though we can never truly eliminate bias from our day-to-day decisions, the simple act of recognizing it in ourselves can help reduce our reliance on imperfect thought processes. That is why it’s important to seek out reliable information that can challenge and enhance our perspective. Every type of bias can be mitigated by basing your decisions on objective data and metrics, whether you’re putting together a succession management strategy or assessing the behaviors and aptitudes of a potential hire.