

Unconscious Bias

by Jon Craighead

“All forms of self-defeating behavior are unseen and unconscious, which is why their existence is denied.” Vernon Howard

Have you ever wondered why you have unexplained, uncontrolled, and recurring reactions to certain people, things, or events? These reactions are most likely generated by unconscious bias. This phenomenon is defined as follows: unconscious: not conscious, without awareness, or cognition; bias: a particular tendency or inclination that prevents unprejudiced consideration of a question, idea, or preference. Unconscious bias takes place as a result of undistinguished and preconceived decisions made, or reactions to previous incidents or events. Such bias by its very nature is typically invisible behavior rather than a deliberate intent. However, this behavior frequently matures into persistent and repeated patterns.

These reflexes are triggered by our brain making quick judgements and assessments of people and situations, which can be either positive or negative. The significance of such responses is that they are rarely based on current experience but mostly on past observances and conclusions. These biases project unconscious preferences to appearances, colors, mannerisms, and political and cultural inclinations. Social scientists believe many of these reactions are acquired in early childhood without an understanding of their significance. It is further believed that children begin to interpret biases from their surrounding environment and adapt them as their own, which then get reinforced as they integrate into society.

Unconscious biases are often initiated by involuntary speaking, facial expressions, or verbal assertions. They happen at lightening speeds, and when unchecked they are difficult if not impossible to retract. They separate and divide and are frequently painfully unpleasant. We all have unconscious biases, and we all are affected by them. However, we can take action to manage the impact of our behavior and decision making. It is incumbent on each individual to take personal responsibility and decide what specific actions are necessary to manage this automaticity.

How does all this relate to the world of business? Business is primarily a people-interacting-with-people phenomenon, and more so than ever in today's electronic age. We have little choice of who walks through our doors. Therefore, responsible business people must become skillfully agile and able to demonstrate our connection to others, regardless of these unreliable and unpredictable background tendencies, while masterfully relating to prospects from all walks of life who may become our clients or customers.

Success demands we master the necessary skills to override these bias occurrences to accomplish anything worthwhile. Doing so will prevent our biases from obstructing our larger commitments, goals, and purposes. A question to contemplate is, can one keep one's biases and still be successful in society? The answer is yes! So how do we do it, since we have little control over our unconscious prejudices? Fortunately, when you are able to identify your biases, you are better able to manage them because they are no longer unconscious.

An Initial step toward reconciling this bias dilemma begins with acknowledging we have biases and our biases are rarely reliably accurate. The point isn't simply to eliminate bias, as ideal as that may be. The salient point of monitoring existing biases is to increase one's ability to operate more effectively across all social and economic levels by focusing on the client. And, it will positively impact personal relationships as well.

Our biases are neither right or wrong; they are a part of being human. However, when they are allowed to roam unchecked they can leave us in some very undesirable and detrimentally untenable situations. A countermeasure is to own our biases, monitor them, take steps to clean up prior errors, and be alerted to potential reoccurrences. Again, when we are able to identify our biases, we are better able to manage them because they are no longer unconscious.

When people are aware of their biases they can manage them and thus circumvent their lurking influences before they are expressed verbally or non-verbally. This approach may annul the currently popular code phrase "politically correct," an expression which seems to endorse saying whatever you feel, regardless of its impact on others. In business such harmful rhetoric could be economic suicide.

The focus of a business transaction should be on solving the customer's needs, not on our thoughts, ideas and opinions about their character or who they are. This is a civility issue more than a moral one, and it augments success both professionally and personally.