

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Workplace Series

Part Three: Understanding Implicit Bias (December 2023)

We've heard from business professionals for the past few years that Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) is a top business trend impacting workplace culture, hiring practices, marketing and communications, and even innovation and a company's bottom line.

To support our secondary research into this topic, we recently attended a DEI webinar series hosted by New Directions Career Center in Columbus, OH, presented by three DEI professionals working in different fields.

Continuing our own series of Action Briefs on this topic, DEI Action Brief Part Three: *Understanding Implicit Bias* explains what bias is, the types of biases we all hold, and how these biases can impact decision-making, hiring, and other aspects of the workplace. Learning about implicit bias and engaging in activities that mitigate bias can support more diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplaces today. If you missed [Part One](#) or [Part Two](#) of this series, each is available on our website.

What Is Bias, and Where Does It Start?

Bias can be defined as an inclination to have a certain perspective in favor of or against a person, group of people, or thing; prejudice. With this in mind, we will look at how a person's biases can impact their decision-making and interactions with others in the workplace. But how does bias begin in the first place?

This [Indeed article](#) explains that biases are formed in people over time and are a collection of our early life experiences—in our families and with the people and groups with which we regularly associate. In other words, we all have positive and negative biases toward different groups of people based on individual characteristics like age, race, gender, culture, and religion, to name a few. That means bias, especially unconscious bias, is something that everyone has. According to this [Catalyst blog post](#), "Having an unconscious bias doesn't make you a bad person—it just means you're human."

Implicit Bias and Its Impact on the Workplace

There are many different types of bias, but implicit (or unconscious) bias is the most difficult to address because people are unaware they have it. In recent supply chain management focus panels, business leaders shared how implicit bias leads to unfair treatment or exclusion of people, specifically a lack of diversity in hiring or promoting. It also leads to poor team communication and collaboration and poor customer service, demonstrating how bias negatively impacts both employees and customers of businesses.

One high-profile [business case](#) where customers and community members were impacted by bias took place at a Philadelphia Starbucks store in 2018. After two Black men were asked to leave the store for not purchasing anything as they waited for a business meeting, the store manager called the police who eventually arrived and arrested both men. Starbucks' then-CEO, Kevin Johnson, formally apologized and addressed the issue in several ways, including temporarily closing thousands of stores to conduct unconscious bias training in the weeks following the incident. While this is an obvious and egregious

example of bias in the workplace, implicit bias usually takes more subtle forms that are not as easy to recognize.

New Directions webinar presenter, Shelby Dawkins (Deputy Director for Healthcare Equality Project, Human Rights Campaign), asked participants to share their ideas and thoughts on how implicit bias might impact the workplace and employees. Participants shared:

- Organizations that hire like-minded people will lack diverse thought in strategic roles and in decision-making.
- Brainstorming and innovation suffer when everyone comes from similar perspectives.
- Implicit bias creates atmospheres of judgment and criticism, rather than curiosity.
- People can feel uncomfortable being themselves if there's a perceived standard or ideal that is rewarded. They can also feel isolated and disengaged from fellow staff members.

These effects of bias can chip away at a company's workplace culture and create an environment that is uncomfortable for everyone, eventually leading to low performance and negative business outcomes. Shelby summarized the feedback by saying: "Implicit bias can impact personal satisfaction and development, suppress workplace productivity, relationships, team collaboration, innovation, and excellence."

Bias Mitigation: We All Have Bias, So What Can We Do About It?

Shelby Dawkins shared several ideas on how to mitigate implicit bias at work and expand our understanding of our own prejudices and stereotyping.

1. **Start with common identity formation:** Engage with applicants or colleagues by finding commonalities. Take time to get to know them. Ask open-ended questions about their life, not leading questions that reveal your stereotypes or biases.
 - Do more listening than talking. Shut off your next thought and really try to connect with the person in front of you.
2. **Perspective taking:** Imagine yourself in another person's shoes.
 - Engage with media, material, and reading around a group that you may hold a bias towards or that you want to learn more about. Search the topic on YouTube, watch movies or documentaries, and read books. Remember to engage with a reputable source, ideally authored or endorsed by members of that group. Shelby Dawkins cautioned: "Reading one book, or listening to one song, or reading one paper is not enough. It usually takes several experiences to begin to scrape the surface of lifting some of our biases."
3. **Consider the opposite:** When you think you are sure about an applicant or coworker, try reconsidering.
 - Question likeability as a reason to hire someone. The workplace is first and foremost professional; friendship is secondary. Experience, skills, functionality, and productivity are more important determinants of success.
4. **Counter stereotypes:** Don't judge a book by its cover.
 - Engage with people in a meaningful way to really learn about them—go beyond what you initially perceive and be curious about a person as an individual rather than as a representative of a group of people.

Removing Bias From Hiring

Blind interview processes can remove bias from the early stages of hiring. Companies committed to diversifying are starting to remove or hide names, addresses, college names, graduation years, and other personal identifying information on resumes so hiring managers can focus on skills, knowledge, and experience for the position. New Directions webinar presenter, Sherrice Sledge-Thomas of the Columbus Chamber, explained, “This can help remove potential bias from the first round of interviews. This practice alone does not guarantee diverse employment outcomes, but it can make hiring managers aware of a larger pool of qualified applicants.”

Removing personal identification from hiring extends to the arts as well. In this [Ethics Unwrapped video](#), the example of symphony orchestras choosing to hold blind auditions (6:47-8:10) led “the percentage of women being chosen to play in symphony orchestras to double.” Unfortunately, there’s still a long way to go, with women in far [fewer leadership roles](#) than men in orchestras.

And it looks like blind grading may be making its way into schools. In a recent [High School Ethics Summit](#) facilitated by MBA Research in Dallas, student participants discussed the ethical principle of fairness. They explained how teachers sometimes cover up student information (e.g., names) before grading papers and tests to reduce bias in the grading process. The students seemed to appreciate this change and felt it was an example of fairness and respect in their school experience.

Addressing Bias in Feedback and Advancement

Supply chain management focus panel participants shared that regular feedback to direct reports is imperative and must be tied to clear expectations of business goals. Tying feedback to business goals eliminates the pitfall of judgment or criticism of a person or group of people and gives everyone pathways for advancement.

This [Harvard Business Review article](#) underscores this feedback by sharing that the persistent low percentage of women in C-Suite roles may be due to the feedback they are given as compared with men. Women tend to receive vague feedback that is focused on communication style rather than the specific feedback given to men, which is usually tied to business outcomes, technical skills, and guidance for advancement. The recommendation is to be consistent with the amount and type of feedback given to all employees, tie it to performance indicators, and offer specific direction for improving skills and knowledge.

As we’ve learned, implicit bias impacts nearly all aspects of the workplace and can have wide-ranging impacts on people’s career trajectories, on a company’s ability to hire the best employees, on teamwork and collaboration, and even on customer service. Like-mindedness can prevent a company from having a diverse set of viewpoints and strategies to respond to problems and opportunities in the marketplace. Bias can be mitigated by putting policies and protocols in place to ensure fairness and diversity in the workplace. These policies are becoming more commonplace as companies realize the business costs of bias and the advantages of adopting bias mitigation strategies.

Links for Further Reading:

- [“Anti-DEI Movement Expands in Politics, Business and Academics”](#)
- [Implicit Association Test](#)
- [“Implicit Bias in the Workplace”](#)
- [Project Implicit](#)
- [Unconscious Bias at Work — Making the Unconscious Conscious](#)

Recommended Books:

- [Biased: Uncovering the Hidden Prejudice That Shapes What We See, Think, and Do](#) by Jennifer Lynn Eberhardt
 - [NPR interview](#) with the author
- [Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People](#) by Mahzarin R. Banaji and Anthony G. Greenwald
 - This book discusses the science around implicit bias.

Discussion Questions:

- If you were applying for a job, how would you feel about the employer hiding your personal information (name, school name, gender, graduation year) and only considering your skills and experience to decide whether to offer you an interview? Do you see any benefits to them having your personal information before making their selections? In considering this question, which [ethical principles](#) come into play?
- Are your teachers using any form of “blind grading” for tests and homework? If yes, do you like it? If not, would you be in favor of them trying it?
- If you had to reach out to your circle of friends or family to recommend someone for a job, would you have a diverse pool of options?
- Depending on how you answered the previous question, think about your circle of family, friends, neighbors, and community members. If you find your circle to be somewhat homogeneous or like-minded in their interests and identities, what is one group you could join today that would expand your group of friends or acquaintances? How do you think this could impact future job opportunities if you had a wider pool of connections? What skills could you bring to a job if you had experience with people from a diverse range of backgrounds or demographics?

Sources:

- [“11 Harmful Types of Unconscious Bias and How to Interrupt Them”](#)
- [“5 Types of Unconscious Bias in the Workplace & How to Eliminate Them”](#)
- [“Definition of Bias - Britannica”](#)
- [“Definition of Bias - Merriam Webster Dictionary”](#)
- [Ethics Unwrapped: Implicit Bias](#)
- [“Everyone Is a Little Bit Biased”](#)



- New Directions Career Center Webinar Series:
 - *What Are Inclusive Workplace Policies?*, presented by Sherrice Sledge-Thomas, Columbus Chamber of Commerce
 - *Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) in the Workplace and Why It Matters*, presented by Alyvia Johnson, American Electric Power
- ["Research: Vague Feedback Is Holding Women Back"](#)
- ["Shattering the Glass Ceiling: Gender Equity at Orchestras"](#)
- ["Two Types of Bias"](#)
- ["What Is Unconscious Bias in the Workplace? How It's Defined and How to Stop It"](#)