

Unconscious Bias in the Workplace

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Possessing bias is part of the human behaviour. From an evolutionary standpoint, it makes more sense to trust those who are like us, because they seem to pose less of a threat. However, in our modern world, we now know that diversity brings with it a raft of benefits. For example, Imran Rasul & Daniel Rogger's (2015) study of diversity in the Nigerian Civil Service shows that project completion rates were significantly higher in more diverse sectors of the civil service.

Tapping into these benefits necessitates a move away from biases. However, in Nigeria, the most diverse country on the African continent, it is a big task. We cannot expect to wake up one day and no longer possess the biases that have accompanied us our whole lives, but we can become more aware of them, the impact they have, and choose to manage them in a progressive manner.

Conscious versus Unconscious Bias

Our biases reveal themselves in both a conscious and unconscious way. Conscious bias is at play when we know that we have a prejudice of some sort. This can be overt as we may not choose to regulate our behaviour even though we are aware that we are biased against a particular group.

Unconscious bias can be more difficult to spot, because, by its nature, we are not aware of it. We can believe that we are acting in a fair and just manner, while still exhibiting bias in our behaviour. This type of bias is embedded in our cultural understanding of the world.

Both types of bias are destructive and can have serious implications for those affected by them and the organisations they work in. However, Eden King & Kristen Jones (2016) have shown that the

more subtle acts of discrimination, caused by unconscious bias, can be more damaging in the long term, especially at work. In a study of 90 samples of workplace discrimination and

the outcomes related to them, they found that across the board, the outcomes of subtle discrimination were "at least as bad as if not worse than overt discrimination" because it can happen many times in a given day and the effects compound quickly.

How Unconscious Bias Manifests in Workplaces

There are many types of unconscious bias and it can appear in many forms at work. Because unconscious bias permeates an organisation's culture it spreads out across the organisation in myriad ways.

It affects formal and informal decision-making processes including recruitment, promotional and career development opportunities, as well as inclusion in events and on projects. It can also affect how management appraise and recognise the contributions of their team members.

Types of Bias Common in the Nigerian Workplace

Ethnicity & Religion

Nigeria is the most diverse country on the African continent and so, it is not surprising that we tend to have bias around ethnicity and religion. Ohunakhin et al.(2019) studied the effect of diversity in a country "with a high level of discrimination" but in a "corporation that preaches against discrimination" in Shell, Lagos. Most of the respondents were Igbo at 42.2%, followed by Yoruba, Hausa and then non-Nigerians. The two dominant religions were Christianity, representing 55.5% followed by Islam at 37.5%. This gives us a flavour of the type of demographic split that exists within a given multinational operating in Nigeria. However not all large employers share the diversity values of Shell.

Richard Ilorah (2009) notes how those workers who "belong to the wrong ethnic group" feel alienated and display a "lack of motivation" at work. On the other hand, their co-workers, who belong "to the ruling (right) ethnic group exude enormous arrogance and are over-protected by the system". These are the ones who are likely to be promoted beyond their capabilities while others, who are suitably qualified languish at the bottom of the organisational tree.

Age

Culturally, we tend to value the experience of the older generations who have been around for longer. While this is commendable, when it is taken to the extreme, it means that younger generations are discriminated against. New ideas, innovations and fresh ways of doing things can be lost when we turn a blind eye to the suggestions of the young. In the American context, Samantha Power, former US ambassador to the United Nations described President-elect, Joe Biden as someone who champions dissenting voices. Although it may sound counterintuitive, having dissenting voices, who are not afraid to speak up when they believe something isn't right is very important in any organisation. We need our young people to feel able to speak up, otherwise we lose the very thing that is most valuable in them, a different way of seeing the world.

Gender

Gender bias is a widespread issue in Nigeria, where culturally we understand that a woman's primary duty is in the home. Many people may therefore carry an unconscious bias that women are not as capable of performing a given job as men who do not have children to care for.

In a study carried out with 32 workers from high street banks in the city of Lagos, Adisa et al .

(2019) provide insights into the working lives of women working at various levels of banking who have all been subjected to some degree of prejudice. Some participants stated directly that their performance is affected by this and that it has led them to do less, speak up less, and contribute fewer ideas.

The Impact of Bias on Workers

Bias, conscious or unconscious have very real implications for the individuals who are prejudiced and the organisations that they work in. Sustained incidents of prejudice over the course of a work day or week can build up, damaging the workers self-esteem, their perceived impact at work and over time will impact their physical and mental health while also causing them to detach from their work as they become increasingly withdrawn as employees.

The decreased self-esteem that stems from bias in the workplace has a direct correlation on the quality of an employee's work, which makes this an important concern for employers. This has been confirmed by a study conducted on 120 workers in various government parastatals across Lagos state. Fatunmbi Oladotun Muideen (2018) showed that the unconscious bias of leaders in the organisation has a negative impact on job satisfaction. The study shows that negative bias leads to poor supervision which in turn impacts the quality of work carried out under them along with the worker's job satisfaction.

Other effects can include increased conflict as people grow increasingly frustrated with their situation and a plethora of negative effects for the business including higher employee turnover, decreased innovation, the risk of litigation and, potentially, a negative brand image – all of which harm the organisation and the bottom line.

Actions that Help Tackle Unconscious Bias in the Workplace

1. Provide Workplace Unconscious Bias Training

The primary aim of unconscious bias training is to raise awareness of unconscious bias, an important first step. Training can also raise awareness of the impact of unconscious bias on under-represented groups and can help those that benefit from training to alter their behaviour.

A study carried out on behalf of the British Equality & Human Rights Commission examined the effectiveness of such training. Not all training is created equal, however, it showed that "more sophisticated" training could "reduce unconscious bias up to eight weeks post-intervention".

The findings of the above-mentioned report highlight the need for unconscious bias training to be seen as part of a wider programme to ensure lasting change:

“If the aim of the training is to have an impact on company practice and employee behaviour to foster inclusive cultures where everyone meets their potential regardless of their identities, unconscious bias training should be treated as just one part of a comprehensive strategy for achieving organization-wide change”.

2. Individuals can Take a Test

Individuals who are interested in finding out more about their own biases can take the Implicit Association Test, IAT. The test is administered by researchers at Harvard and is available online (Project Implicit). It has been taken by millions of people around the globe and is a useful tool to help individuals become more aware of their own implicit biases.

The test measures the response time of the individual for words that accompany images. When the word is usually associated with the picture, the response time is shorter than when it is not. It's worth mentioning here that unconscious bias can also be internalised, so that members of under-represented minority groups assume the bias against themselves too.

3. Champion Self-Awareness

Unconscious bias occurs in split-second judgements as our brain tries to maximise efficiency. To overcome this, we can slow down the thought process to become more self-reflective and aware of our decision-making process.

When we are aware of our biases, either through self-reflection or through testing, we can take steps to tackle them one at a time. Knowing the biases and the situations in which those biases are likely to flare up can make us force ourselves to stop, consider and be more conscious of what we're doing.

Leaders should champion these efforts among their teams without negativity. Remember, we all have biases so it's not anyone's fault that their brain works this way.

4. Encourage Micro-Affirmations

Micro-affirmations are small supportive gestures which can help encourage others towards success. They are so small that they may often go unnoticed, however, over time they compound, much like small acts of aggression, but with a much more positive effect.

Micro-affirmations may be conscious or unconscious, but we can choose to implement them and encourage our teams to do so too. In time, micro-affirmations can rebalance the scales against unconscious bias.

5. Implement System Protocols

As organisations are run by humans, it's no surprise that organisational culture can be beset by unconscious bias. The accepted norms within an organisation often go unchallenged, because 'that's just how it's done'.

Unearth these unconscious norms within your organisation by carrying out organisation-wide audits. Devising and implementing decision-making policies can interrupt unconscious bias in its tracks. These may include removing identifying information from job applications, for example, or structured interview questions which apply to all candidates. In addition to slowing down the thought process, these system protocols can make it easier for peers to spot and address unconscious bias when it appears.

Taking Charge of the Problem

Hoping to eradicate unconscious bias is an unrealistic expectation. It has been hard-wired into our brains through evolution. However, we can manage it effectively with a sustained effort and the desire to do so.

Bias can lead to negative impacts in the workplace and our society as a whole. Micro aggressions which accumulate between religions, ethnicity and tribes at work naturally spill into our wider lives and create greater disharmony on our streets.

We must be aware that tackling unconscious bias won't be easy. Changing subconscious behaviours are inherently more difficult than ones that we are consciously aware of. The first step, as Cynthia Lee of George Washington University Law School argues, is awareness of the prevalence of unconscious bias. However, awareness alone is not sufficient to disrupt its impact. Organisations and those within them need to be aware that tackling unconscious bias in the workplace is more about managing it effectively than stamping it out altogether.

We depend on our leaders to take up the challenge and show the way in this regard. Each business or organisational leader has the opportunity to take a stand, not just for their individual team or organisation, but for Nigeria as a whole. We all have biases and therefore, we must all work to overcome them and to hold ourselves and those we manager to account in overcoming theirs.

When we do so, our staff will enjoy a better working environment, they will be happier, more engaged, more efficient more productive and will generally improve business outcomes for us. When everyone has an equal opportunity to thrive at work, people are more willing to give their very best.

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