



## Unconscious Bias Training Is Not Enough – Part 1

🕒 21 Dec 2015 👤 Dr Mark Toner (/talking-about/top-stories/itemlist/user/1109-drmarktoner)

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Almost every week in the national or business press there are articles about women in business, covering issues such as a lack of women in senior positions, pay gaps between men and women, the business case for gender diversity, and discussions about bullying, harassment and career discrimination. Given that these are important issues for Australia, it is critical that these issues continue to be aired continuously. However, in many of these articles the cause of all the above problems is generally attributed to unconscious gender bias.

This perhaps occurs for two reasons. Firstly, it is an easy way out to attribute the cause of these problems to other people's unconscious beliefs because they are not aware of such beliefs and therefore can't be held accountable for them; in other words, no-one is to blame.

Secondly, the men and women who believe unconscious bias is the main or sole cause of poor treatment of women do not perhaps observe the degree of conscious sexism that occurs in business.

Men who are consciously sexist have learned to be careful about what they say in front of women (and perhaps vice versa), which means that many women are not aware of the extent of sexist attitudes that I observe as a businessman mixing with male company directors and senior managers. Hence, many of the authors of such articles, who are mostly women, underestimate the degree of conscious sexism prevailing in our workplace, and, as a result, they incorrectly attribute sexist behaviour primarily to unconscious bias.

Some large listed organisations have stated in their annual reports that they have put their staff through unconscious bias training, and that is a good start, but the real question is: what are they then doing to assist their staff to deal with unconscious biases and how are they addressing the conscious biases we also are subject to?

Certainly, training which increases awareness of our unconscious biases is useful, but is insufficient on its own to bring about greatly improved employment practices, because awareness alone of one’s deep-seated unconscious biases does not usually remove them.

A few definitions may help.

Cognitive bias occurs from different causes when we make judgements and decisions, and there are more than 150 known types of such bias. Gender bias is the general name given to any type of bias which occurs in a situation involving gender.

Most organisations which have written policies and procedures for recruitment, performance appraisal and promotion of staff believe they manage these key processes well and that their decisions are based on “merit”, which they regard as an objective concept but is actually very subjective, partly due to bias. Unfortunately, current data on the number of women in middle and senior positions in industry and academia in Australia indicate these beliefs that merit is objective are ill-founded, and gender bias is prevalent in many organisations. The problem is not only due to unconscious bias, as many commentators observe, but both conscious and unconscious bias and a general lack of understanding of how bias affects our decisions about people.

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Modelling of an organisation with eight levels of management from the very bottom to the top, which initially had an equal number of men and women at each level, shows that a mere 1% bias against women in all promotion decisions produced twice as many men than women in the level reporting to the CEO. A 1% bias in decision-making is undetectable in practice, but this modelling showed the significant effect which a tiny amount of constant bias can have when management makes decisions about promotion of its staff.

In summary, conscious sexism does exist amongst Australian board members and managers to a greater degree than women may observe. Merit as a criterion for recruitment and promotion decisions is a very subjective concept, and is open to bias. Even slight biases in organisational decision-making can lead to wide differences in the distribution of genders across the organisation. Giving staff unconscious bias training is not enough to seriously reduce gender bias, because awareness of one’s unconscious biases does not usually remove them and such training does not address conscious bias. To mitigate gender bias, more comprehensive training and new organisational practices are required.

*Click here to read Part 2 of this article. (/talking-about/top-stories/item/6649-unconscious-bias-training-is-not-enough-part-2)*



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