



## Unconscious Bias Training Is Not Enough – Part 2

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

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Gender bias, both conscious and unconscious, is the general name given to any of the many types of cognitive bias which occurs in a situation involving gender. It is present in many organisations, detrimentally affecting the careers of women far more than men. How else can the fact that most large businesses and universities in Australia are run predominantly by men, and women comprise only 6% of CEOs in the ASX200 be explained? Particularly given research shows that women are just as ambitious and capable as men?

Let's take a common situation: one female candidate and three male candidates being interviewed for recruitment by an organisation. Let's assume there are three interviewers, with one female amongst them, although in male-dominated businesses, the interviewers will often all be male. The interviewers will try to be fair and treat all applicants equally, but they will probably be unaware of the following biases which can affect their interviewing behaviour and subsequent decision-making about the suitability of each applicant:

in-group bias, which causes us all to favour people like us, i.e. of the same gender, background, experience, interests or personality type

the halo effect, which causes us to allow the physical characteristics of others to affect our judgement of their other qualities, e.g. physically attractive people are more trustworthy

anchoring bias, which causes us to rely too much on an irrelevant piece of data or belief, e.g. one of the interviewers had previously hired a woman and it turned out badly

minority pool bias, which causes interviewers to evaluate more negatively applicants who comprise a minority of the applicant pool, in this case the female candidate

confirmation bias, which causes us to notice data and information which conforms with our beliefs and to disregard data and information which doesn't.

So the single female applicant starts out with an initial disadvantage of having the minority gender amongst the applicants. When interviewed, the male interviewers may see the male applicants as members of their in-group and favour them consciously or unconsciously, and they may see the female applicant as a member of their out-group with characteristics similar to the other women in business they know, which could be negative. The other biases can further confuse their judgement of the most appropriate applicant.

The above issues can also be present in performance appraisals, promotion and other decisions about people. So, organisations need to examine not just their written policies and procedures but their current practices in the hiring, performance review and promotion of staff.

Unfortunately, there is little evidence that consciously realising an unconscious belief or association is sufficient to mitigate it. It may do so in some cases. Some unconscious biases can be extremely deep-seated, eg. in-group bias. By contrast, there is some evidence that unconscious bias training can reinforce cognitive biases and prejudice. Bringing an unconscious belief or association to the conscious level does not necessarily remove it from the unconscious mind or change it. In fact, if the unconscious belief is aligned with a conscious belief, it will reinforce the unconscious belief, so that if someone who is consciously sexist discovers he/she is unconsciously sexist as well, his/her beliefs at each level are unlikely to change and could be strengthened. It's also possible to have conscious and unconscious beliefs remaining unaligned with each other, which will cause confusion in the mind of the person when a relevant situation arises. So it is a complex scene and different biases need different treatments to mitigate their different causes.

Best practice would be for the recruitment panel to discuss their own biases before interviewing candidates, to have at hand a description of biases relevant to recruitment, their causes and their mitigation, and after the interviews, to discuss how the panel mitigated their own biases in a very transparent process. How long will it take for business and academia to adopt such practices?

In summary, organisations need to change their employment practices to achieve greater mitigation of gender bias in decisions about their staff.


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*Click here to read Part 1 of this article (</talking-about/top-stories/item/6646-unconscious-bias-training-is-not-enough-part-1>).*

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



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