

Unconscious bias—what it is and how to overcome it

Although we may not be aware of this, everyone has unconscious prejudices based on social norms and stereotypes. These prejudices are well documented and begin in childhood. Unconscious bias can negatively affect our behavior and judgment.

What is unconscious bias?

Our brains absorb countless pieces of information and mentally groups things together to give meaning to the world. When these categorizations are tagged with labels like “good” or “bad” and applied to entire groups, bias occurs. Biases can be based on gender, age, race, height, weight, marital and parental status, disability status, foreign accent, where someone has gone to school and more. While we may think that we are not prejudiced, unconscious biases are a fact of life and they can be overcome with awareness and taking thoughtful action to minimize them.

What is the effect of unconscious bias?

Unconscious bias can cause us to make choices in favor of one group over another. There are many studies documenting how unconscious bias affects decisions in the workplace.

- A Duke University study found that “mature-faced” people had a career advantage over “baby-faced” people (people with large, round eyes, high eyebrows and small chin).
- A Yale University study found that male and female scientists are more likely to hire men, rate them higher than women in competency and pay them more than women.
- An MIT and University of Chicago study found that applicants with names the survey-takers associated with white persons received 50% more callbacks than those with names the survey-takers associated with Black persons.

How can unconscious bias be minimized?

A good first step is to recognize that everyone has it and to question the way they think about it. Here are some unconscious biases that have a direct impact on the workplace:

- Affinity bias—The tendency to warm up to people like ourselves.
- Halo effect—The tendency to think everything about a person is good because you like that person.
- Perception bias—The tendency to form stereotypes and assumptions about particular groups that make it impossible to make independent judgments about members of these groups.
- Confirmation bias—The tendency of people to seek information that confirms existing beliefs or assumptions.
- Group thinking—This bias occurs when people try too hard to fit into a particular group by imitating others or withholding thoughts and opinions. When this happens the person loses part of their identity and the organization loses out on creativity and innovation.

To overcome unconscious bias we must become aware of its presence, reflect on the nature of prejudice, determine how it affects our ideas and then commit ourselves to implementing practical strategies to counteract bias through behavioral change.

For more information and resources, visit MagellanHealthcare.com/BIPOC-MH.

Sources:

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