

An introduction to Stereotyping and Unconscious Bias in the Workplace – Being Brutally Honest

By Stan Kimer



Expert Forum

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Let's really get honest with each other. How many have thought these things:

1. You see the pretty blond successful woman: "Yeah, she obviously got there by sleeping with the bosses."
2. You see the overweight employee ... "They are probably slow and lazy and spend half their day eating snacks at their desk."
3. You see the new young millennial employee ... "Ughh! I hope I don't have to work with him. He will probably feel entitled, will probably want to be promoted into my job after 3 months, and will probably be playing video games all day at his desk."
4. The older mature employee ... "They will never be able to keep up with change and always want to do things the way they were done 20 years ago."
5. The single mother with three small children ... "I don't want her on my team. She'll probably miss half of each work week taking care of child emergencies."
6. The new black female executive ... "Obviously promoted to fill a quota. And they get double credit with her ... black AND a woman."
7. The gay man and the lesbian. "Oh – I better be careful – all they will be thinking about all day is having sex with me."

And of course this list is not exhaustive... I am sure you can think of several more. So what should we do? It is important to recognize that these thoughts are a combination of stereotyping and unconscious bias – two concepts that are very closely related.

A **stereotype** is a preconceived, standardized, group-shared idea about the alleged essential nature of a whole category of persons without regard to individual differences within the category.

Unconscious Bias refers to the attitudes of stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. Very often these unconscious biases that simply pop into our heads are stereotypes that have become ingrained in our unconscious thought processes.

We need to realize that they are there, that they are wrong, and take deliberate action to squelch them. Get to know each person you work with as an individual with a job to do and with key skills they bring with them. Realize the value of each and every team member, and work to promote a diverse team that works together in a mutually respectful climate to achieve the very best business results. We can each take thoughtful preemptive action to set aside our unconscious bias

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to create a workplace where everyone is equally valued and treated with respect. A peer of mine, John Luecke, who serves as a long-time Raleigh Sister Cities volunteer with me, is an Intercultural Communication Trainer and Consultant, offered me some additional material of his on the physiology of unconscious bias and together we came up with some steps to address it. For more information about John Luecke: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/jrluecke/>

John writes: “In terms of a lot of typical workplace biases, the solution is much more complicated than just becoming aware of them and then resisting the urge to enact your biases.

After all, unconscious biases are just that – unconscious. We’re generally not aware of them, thus making it hard to correct something we don’t see in ourselves. There are relatively objective ways of assessing our unconscious biases – the Implicit Attitude Test or IAT, for example. It’s a free, self-administered online test that helps identify unconscious bias. You can take the test here <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>

When I took it for potential biases toward black people and Muslims, the IAT told me that I had a “strong preference for white people.” A bit of a shock, but it didn’t call me a bigot or suggest I engaged in prejudicial actions against blacks, just that I preferred white people. Given my limited exposure to black people, this should not have been a surprise. I fared much better with Muslims, but then I’ve spent a lot of time studying Islam, Middle Eastern culture and have several Muslim friends. For better or worse unconscious biases provide value; for example, they kept our ancestors alive when threatened by sabre tooth tigers or the warriors from the other side of the mountain. Today they continue to alert us to perceived threats and dangers.

Here’s how they work: When we see something as threatening, dangerous, or fearful our amygdala kicks in and floods our bodies with cortisol and testosterone – two hormones that allow us to quickly respond to dangers. The amygdala is a walnut-shaped structure that sits at the base of our brains and processes incoming signals. The result is a fight-flight or freeze response to danger, and it’s kept our species alive for thousands of years. The amygdala typically takes between 80 and 200 milliseconds to respond, and it shuts down our brain’s communication with our prefrontal cortex – that’s where reasonable thinking takes place.

If we can find a few seconds of stillness to let our prefrontal cortex become

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engaged, we can have a much more reasoned response to a perceived threat. However, if someone is coming after you with a big knife, go with the fight or flight response and let your prefrontal cortex sort things out later.

But for the kinds of perceptual threats we're likely to encounter in the workplace – our biased reactions to the overweight employee, the millennial, the older employee — find that moment of stillness and let your reason take over from your amygdala.

Unconscious biases are part of the hard wiring of our brains. Incidentally, our brains consume approximately 20 percent of our bodies' energy. By establishing unconscious biases, our brains conserve energy and make lots of automatic decisions. Some research suggests that up to 98 percent of what's going on in our brains happens at an unconscious level. Problems occur when our brains make unconscious decisions about people, especially those decisions that disadvantage some people and prevent us from forming productive relationships with them. There are lots of ways of dealing with unconscious bias beyond simply recognizing it in ourselves. One of the easiest is regular meditation – any kind of mediation. You don't have to spend two years in a Tibetan cave, but 15 to 20 minutes a day of meditation can slow the response of your amygdala and provide time for your prefrontal cortex to engage. This includes such techniques as breath mediation, walking meditation, yoga, tai chi, qi gong, etc. Meditation is only one of the many tools we can use to reduce our unconscious biases.”

Actions to take: With John, here is a combined list of actions to take to address stereotyping and unconscious bias:

- Since unconscious biases are just that – unconscious, we may not be aware of them. There is a great tool for objectively assessing our own unconscious bias: the Implicit Attitude Test (IAT) Link: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>
- I often provide workshops on diversity and sensitivity training, and one of the modules explores stereotyping. An excellent group exercise addressing stereotyping: “Release the Stereotype You Have of Others” from [Clyde W. Ford's](#) Book, “We Can All Get Along.”
- Find a moment of stillness and consciously think through your thoughts in our prefrontal cortex (reasonable thinking) vs. amygdala (quick millisecond reaction to stimulus)
- Continually seek additional education: workshops, online tools, books on this area, etc.

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- Networking and interacting with groups and people unlike yourself, especially those that may be new to you or that you are uncomfortable with.
- 15 – 20 minutes of meditation – allow time for your prefrontal cortex to engage.

Be mindful of stereotyping and unconscious bias –**detect** and acknowledge that it is there, **reflect** on actions you need to take, and then **reject** the biases with a plan of action that you will execute.