

CULTURE HACKER
REPROGRAMMING THE EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE™

A Guide to Unconscious Bias in the Workplace



Introduction

This guide will provide you with the ability to start recognizing biases within yourself and others; the ability to navigate conversations with others on those biases; and some simple habits to utilize personally to overcome any negative racial attitudes you may have. While there are many conscious and unconscious biases at play in the workplace, this guide talks specifically about racial bias and what is happening around us right now.

"The longer we listen to one another—with real attention—the more commonality we will find in all our lives. That is, if we are careful to exchange with one another life stories and not simply opinions."
—Barbara Deming, writer

As the quote indicates, the longer we listen to one another with real intention, the more commonality we will find in. It is those commonalities, not our differences that should define our culture, our relationships, and team. As Astronaut Donald Williams said perfectly, "When you see the earth from space....The things that we share in our world are far more valuable than those which divide us."

When we meet and interact with others, especially for the first time, we often make assumptions about them. These assumptions, or biases, are usually general in nature and are created by what we view, hear, and have experienced in our past. Bias is a huge part of what our views are made of, because bias is a natural, learned response, taught as early as childhood. Regardless of what you may have thought, the first thing you must recognize in this journey regarding unconscious bias is that those assumptions exist.

Bias is defined as an inclination of temperament, outlook, or judgment regarding something or someone. We are often unconscious of our biases, yet they still play a strong role in how we feel or judge things or people. Unconscious or implicit biases are those attitudes or stereotypes that impact our understanding, actions, decision-making, and how we interact with others. These biases form within everyone at a young age, as children begin to form a sense of their community. Some type of bias has even been necessary throughout time, in terms of keeping us safe and allowing us to make quick decisions.

Most of us believe that, for the most part, we are ethical and unbiased, and therefore, find it easy to transfer any suggestion of being biased to other people. However, as American psychologist Mahzarin Banaji reveals, "More than two decades of research suggests that in reality, most of us fall woefully short of our inflated self-perception." In short, we are all biased in some way.

But because bias as a concept has a very negative connotation, people are encouraged to repress their bias, which causes tension and frustrations within us. It is much better to discuss and learn to understand our biases, therefore being able to reset or re-learn what we know.

Our unconscious bias may affect our initial perception and interaction of another by:

- How we see them.
- How we react or respond to them.
- How friendly we are towards them.
- How much attention we give them.
- How comfortable we feel with them.
- How much we actually listen to them.

It is natural to have biases. Our brain organizes information based on our experiences to enable faster decision-making, forming our biases. Our biases can serve us well most of the time. For example, when we see something potentially dangerous, our brains will automatically decide what we need to do. Although these feelings and subsequent actions are based on our past experiences and are natural, they can sometimes lead to us making harmful decisions—especially when we act on our biases because of another's race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, etc. When we respond to people differently because of their differences, it is important to question our beliefs and actions.

"At the end of the day, things can no longer be what they've always been."
—Andrea Simon, *thought leader*

Our biases may influence our interactions at work beyond just our initial impressions of others. We have all reacted, responded, acted, paid attention, or listened differently because of what we saw or heard in someone before we actually got to know them. We need to recognize that we all do this, and the workplace is one of the most prominent areas in which this can occur. At work, stereotypes around gender, race, disability, and sexual orientation have all played a part over the years. These stereotypes arose because of our upbringings and people like parents, teachers, friends, coaches, and managers who have had influence over us. As a result of our socialization under various people, our biases are formed and ingrained into our subconscious.

Please note that most of these biases did not originate from a place of bad intent, rather just as a response to societal, judicial, economic, or philosophical influences. And the good news is, we can do something about our biases, because we can evolve from what we have learned.

Types of Bias

We may experience or hold onto many biases. Let us review the most common biases:

- Similarity bias: When a person is more comfortable connecting with others who share the same interests, background, experience, or culture.
- Affinity bias: When a person feels they have an affinity toward someone because they have something in common with that person, such as similar interests, goals, or hobbies.
- Attribution bias: We tend to attribute good things in our lives to our own efforts, and attribute bad things to the actions of others or simply bad luck. When we think about other people, the opposite occurs—we tend to think that when something good happens to them, it's just good luck, and when something bad happens, it was their own fault.
- Confirmation bias: We tend to look for things in another person to reinforce the impression or stereotype we have of that person.
- Conformity bias: When a person has the desire to align their opinion or action with that of the majority, even if they do not truly agree with the majority's point of view. This can also be seen as group peer pressure, or the desire to fit in.

"Collective fear stimulates herd instinct and tends to produce ferocity toward those who are not regarded as members of the herd."

—Bertrand Russell, social critic

Many of these biases we have reviewed can affect the way we interact with others based around their gender, race, disability, or sexual orientation. In this guide, we will consider the damage that may come from a harmful bias around race.

Racial bias is the attitude, stereotype, decision-making, or reaction we have to someone of the same or different race. It is a form of implicit or unconscious bias. Racial bias is connected to all four types of bias we have identified previously, and presents itself in the following ways:

- Similarity bias: We will be more comfortable connecting with people of the same race.
- Affinity bias: We naturally have an affinity towards people of the same race.
- Attribution bias: We may blame other people/races for something bad that happens to us. Or if something bad happens to them, then it was their own fault.
- Confirmation bias: We tend to look for things that reinforce any stereotypes we have about a particular race and may ignore examples that do not confirm that stereotype.

- **Conformity bias:** When a majority of people seem to believe something about a certain race, we are more likely to adopt that belief even if we know it may be untrue.

The reality is that it is easy to form a racial bias with so much news, information, and interactions going on around us, and, as we have already suggested, the bias may be unconscious or implicit rather than overt or blatant. The most important thing to recognize is that we are all biased in some way and most likely have some racial biases within us.

Subtle Versus Blatant Discrimination

Unfortunately, we are seeing and hearing news every day of blatant racial discrimination, such as racial slurs we see daily on social media or the treatment of Black individuals by civilians, the police, or the judicial system. There is, thankfully, movement happening towards a space where blatant racial discrimination is less tolerated, but we know there is still plenty of work to be done. However, it is not just these blatant acts of discrimination by individuals or institutions that create a hostile, uncomfortable, or negative work environment. It is the subtle and unconscious acts that can leave those affected by our biases stressed, frustrated, and under-valued.

Harvard Business Review wrote about the impact of subtle bias in the workplace in their 2016 article titled, “Why Subtle Bias Is So Often Worse Than Blatant Discrimination.” Their findings are summed up by the following:

“The results of this meta-analysis confirm that experiencing any kind of discrimination has negative consequences. But more importantly, the results show that across every job and individual outcome, the effects of subtle discrimination and bias were as bad, if not worse than, overt or blatant discrimination.”

Many times, it is a small act performed by someone else that makes us feel like we are left out, isolated, or undervalued, which can be particularly difficult when we feel it is because of our race.

While anyone can be made to feel this way based on bias and stereotypes, women, members of minority races, those with disabilities, and members of the LGBTQ+ community are targets of these subtle behaviors more frequently. Research has shown that the most common racist, sexist, ableist, or homophobic behaviors are these small, subtle actions called micro-inequities and micro-aggressions.

“It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.”

—Audre Lorde, writer

Micro-Inequities

In 1973, Professor Mary Rowe from MIT coined the term “micro-inequity.” Micro-inequities are subtle, often unconscious messages that devalue, discourage, and impair workplace performance. They are conveyed through facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, and words that send a message to the recipient that they are less than or separate from the group. As Rowe wrote:

“Micro-inequities often have serious cumulative, harmful effects, resulting in hostile work environments and continued minority discrimination in public and private workplaces and organizations. What makes micro-inequities particularly problematic is that they consist in micro-messages that are hard to recognize for victims, bystanders, and perpetrators alike. When victims of micro-inequities do recognize the micro-messages, it is exceedingly hard to explain to others why these small behaviors can be a huge problem.”

Examples of micro-inequities are:

- A group of employees going out for coffee or drinks after work and consistently leaving one person on the team behind.
- Pronouncing someone's name incorrectly all the time, even or especially after being corrected.
- Looking at your phone while someone is talking to you.
- Incorrectly stating someone's ethnicity.
- Continuously interrupting or talking over someone.
- Not looking someone in the eye.
- Rolling your eyes or sighing when a person makes a comment in a meeting.
- Introducing one colleague as a “rock star” and the other just by their name.
- Having inside jokes with colleagues aimed at certain minorities.
- Only going to lunch with someone on your team who is more like you.
- Continuously criticizing ideas from some members of the team.

While micro-inequities can be targeted at anyone, they tend to be targeted toward women and minorities more often due to race and gender bias and stereotypes. While often unintentional small acts, they have a lasting effect on the target and create negative feelings that drive a belief about the culture of the organization.

Leadership Reflection: What micro-inequities have you dealt with or experienced? Consider what micro-inequities you might have communicated to others, and how you should work to correct them.

Do Micro-Inequities happen to everyone?

- Micro-inequities happen more frequently to diverse populations because of biases that already exist.
- Diverse populations already have the potential to feel marginalized.
- Subtle actions have more impact on diverse populations because:
 - The majority of those in positions of “power” are Caucasian men (70% of senior leaders in America).
 - Minorities are less confident than Caucasian men to surface unfairness at work.
 - Black men and women and other women of color are less likely to have advocates or mentors in the organization to discuss their concerns.

Micro-Aggressions

As opposed to the more subtle micro-inequities, micro-aggressions are small, slightly more overt acts (and often unintentional expressions) of racism, sexism, ageism, or ableism. Micro-aggressions are *directly* related to race, gender, sexual orientation, or ability.

“Racial micro-aggressions are commonplace daily indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate racial slights and insults toward people of color.”
—Derald Sue, professor

Some examples of micro-aggressions are:

- Clutching your purse as a Black man walks by you.
- Assuming Asian or Latinx people are foreign-born.
- Complimenting a Black colleague on being articulate.
- A white person saying, “I am not racist, I have Black friends.”
- Trying to speak Spanish to a Hispanic individual before knowing whether they speak English.
- Assuming someone was only hired or retained because they are a minority.
- Asking the only female in the room to write on the board because she has the best handwriting.
- Assuming someone’s role in the organization based on their race, gender, or other difference.
- Acting surprised when an Asian person speaks English well.
- Asking, “When are Black people going to get over it?”

These micro-aggressions can be very harmful to the individual being singled out or talked about. Workplace morale and productivity are affected, too.

Leadership Reflection: What micro-aggressions have you dealt with or experienced? Consider what micro-aggressions in which you might have participated, and how you should work to correct them.

The Impact of Racial Bias in the Workplace

Micro-inequities or -aggressions based on racial bias can greatly impact a person's performance at work.

- People spend time trying to understand why they are being treated this way. They often wonder what they have done. They may question their worth, which impacts their attitude and feelings toward the work.
- People can become isolated and withdrawn from their work and their team as they are made to feel they do not fit in.
- They become less productive and less enthusiastic about doing their work.
- There is no legal recourse for subtle bias, so these subtle biases often go unreported. This means that micro-inequities and -aggressions can occur a lot more often, as the behaviors are reinforced simply by not being called out.

Managing Our Biases

Like any type of change, managing our biases needs to start with you. You cannot be focused on changing others if you are not committed to changing yourself first. While institutions and organizations consider process changes to level the playing field and minimize groups having structural power, we must be willing to look at ourselves first.

We have already touched on the first step that needs to happen: the need to recognize that bias exists in everyone and that, to some degree, racial biases can exist in anyone. People have become afraid to talk about any type of bias they may have, because it is seen as negative, so people push down their biases and hide them. Repressing bias causes it to become more unconscious, more implicit, and, as we have discussed, ultimately more harmful. By acknowledging that we all have biases, we can begin to understand where our biases come from and start to understand the steps needed to make changes.

"One way or another we are all biased; but still, we have the modern cortical capacity to choose whether or not to let the harmful biases dictate our behavior."

—Abhijit Naskar, neuroscientist

Minimizing Bias at Work:

- Recognize your biases.
- Be self-aware of your bias in various situations involving people of another race.
- Be willing to start a conversation and engage with people of another race whether personally, with team members, or when talking to customers. Dialogue is the best way to reduce biases.
- Care enough to want others not to feel excluded, isolated, or disrespected.
- Be careful with or change your words as they relate to others.
- Consciously offer micro-affirmations to people, instead of micro-inequities or -aggressions.

“Without a sense of caring, there can be no sense of community.”
—Anthony J. D’Angelo, author

We cannot remove racial bias, so the most important thing we can do is be willing to talk about the biases we have. Rather than repress or dismiss a bias, be willing to analyze it and talk about it with others.

Be Willing to Change Our Words

If you want to change your world, change your words! Words shape your thoughts and actions more powerfully than any other force. While blatant racism can be seen in language or words, there are many subtler things that you may say that make people uncomfortable. We will review a few common phrases of micro-aggressions that, although they may not have a malicious intent, are racist. Although you may have never said these phrases aloud, you may have thought something similar at one point. We need to be able to understand why these phrases are harmful and hurtful so that we can dismantle any unconscious biases that are dictating our thoughts and actions.

- “I don’t see color.”
 - Talking about race or someone’s “color” is the only way to reduce racial bias. It is important to acknowledge and appreciate someone’s race or ethnic background, not minimize it.
- “I’m not racist; I have friends who are Black.”
 - Very few people think they are racist because most people are not blatantly racist and probably have friends of other races. However, as we have learned, all people are biased and can have some element of racial bias.
- “I couldn’t tell you that were not white from just talking to you.”
 - Indicating that being or acting white is somehow better is not better.

- “I just assumed you would want to eat Mexican food.”
 - Making assumptions on what people want to eat, listen to, or do because of their race is reinforcing a stereotype.
- “I don’t even think of you as Asian.”
 - Indicating that a person has some positive quality even though they are of a certain race is demeaning.
- “I am glad you got the job. We need more diversity around here.”
 - Suggesting that people only get a job or remain in their job because of diversity is a slight on their performance and abilities.

For us to dismantle racism, we have to understand what it looks like and sounds like. Although some of us may have never knowingly heard or seen racism, we still need to understand why these acts and phrases are harmful. Ignorance ultimately breeds suffering, so the only way to move forward in these conversations is knowledge and understanding of why these phrases are inappropriate.

Micro-Affirmations

One behavior change we can all make is to start using micro-affirmations to bring people to the table. Micro-affirmations are small acts that open doors to opportunity; they are gestures of inclusion and caring and graceful acts of listening. Research shows that behavior is easier to change than beliefs or biases. While awareness of bias will help us change, making small behavior changes, and establishing new behavior habits is something we can implement immediately.

Micro-affirmations are a way to minimize the impact of bias at work and, as habits develop, they may also change our beliefs over time. As an example, many of us want to change our mindset around health, knowing that we need to exercise more frequently, reduce bad habits like smoking, sleep more, eat healthier, etc. But most people fail to change their entire lifestyle. However, if you commit to changing one behavior and making it a routine, such as walking a mile each day, it is much more likely that your thinking and behaviors around the other elements of a healthy lifestyle will change.

Examples of Micro-Affirmations:

- Intentionally asking others for their opinions.
- Recognizing the achievements of others and ensuring credit is given for work done.
- Taking a genuine, professional interest in someone’s personal life.
- Spending time with those on your team whom you do not know very well.
- Stepping in when someone is interrupted to ensure their comments are heard and finished.
- Inviting someone outside of your normal group to attend a business networking event with you.

- Asking open-ended questions to learn more about someone or their ideas.

Ultimately, micro-affirmations are actions that bring someone into the group.

“Micro-affirmations are **tiny acts** of opening doors to opportunity, **gestures of inclusion and caring**, and graceful acts of listening.” —Mary Rowe, MIT professor

As the quote from Mary Rowe suggests, anything you do that demonstrates care, inclusion, listening, or opening up doors can begin making a difference. By affirming and practicing these positive behaviors, we can block unwanted ones. After all, attitudes follow behavior just as behavior follows attitudes.

Now that we have an understanding of what micro-affirmations are, let's take another look at those harmful phrases that we reviewed during the last activity and learn how we can transform these into gestures of inclusion.

- “I don't see color.”
 - “I want to learn more about you. Tell me more about your experience.”
- “I'm not racist; I have friends who are Black.”
 - “I apologize for what I said and how it hurt you. I want to hear your story.”
- “I couldn't tell you that were not white from just talking to you.”
 - “It is nice to finally meet you in person.”
- “I just assumed you would want to eat Mexican.”
 - “Where would you like to go eat?”
- “I don't even think of you as Asian.”
 - “I want to learn more about you. Tell me about your experience growing up in your family.”
- “I am glad you got the job. We need more diversity around here.”
 - “I am glad you got the job!”

We have to remove harmful insinuations and references to race from our language. In return, we need to focus on messaging that is more general and positive.

Responding to Racial Bias

While this is easier said than done, we must be willing to talk about those small and sometimes unintentional subtle micro-inequities and -aggressions to start building a more inclusive workplace. We also must recognize that just because someone brought an element of our behavior to our attention, they very likely did not do so with malice or hostility. We must accept our own biases, so we need to be prepared to thank those who may highlight our biases with the goal of ultimately making us and our workplace better.

By creating a culture of acceptance and gratitude, we can make our workplace and communities a better place in which to reside and thrive.

Here are some ideas for managing racial bias in your workplace:

- Start a conversation or provide feedback. Ask people to explain their intentions.
- Let others know about the situation. Speak with a trusted co-worker.
- Speak with your manager or human resources to make them aware of what has happened.
- Recognize your worth and value.

"We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools."
—Martin Luther King, Jr., civil rights leader

Honoring yourself and others directly correlates with how you view and, consequentially, treat others. When we do not honor ourselves, we are unable to honor others or see the positive value in them. When we have poor self-image, bias is allowed to become more prevalent as we assign names, tags, and stereotypes to them to make us feel better.

"It's difficult to honor others if you don't honor yourself. When you honor yourself, you will not allow prejudice to have a space. When you honor yourself, you can stand against injustice, speak transformational words, appreciate differences, and not allow ignorance to rule inside your borders."
—Dr. Gail Hayes, thought leader