WHAT IS UNCONSCIOUS BIAS?

By Nancy Boyle | EAP Trainer

As our communities and workplaces continue to evolve and become more diverse, we need to pay attention to what professional practices may need to change along the way. We need to examine our unconscious bias – stereotypes or prejudices we may hold about groups of people without being aware of it.

People can harbor unconscious bias against or in favor of a specific group or person even when they consciously believe that unfair treatment and judgment of others are wrong.

Example: Have you ever heard someone in the workplace make a comment such as, “Are we sure she would be the best choice as project lead? She has a couple kids at home. Would this project be too stressful for her?”

Although we may think we’re looking out of the best interests of the company and placing the best person in the job, we cannot assume that our co-worker being a parent would deter them from being the ideal fit for the position.

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Keeping in Touch

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YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

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Q: I view all people as equal, so I’m not biased, right?
A: We are all biased. Being biased does not mean we are a racist or bigot. What it means is we grow up in a certain environment that influences how we view the world, and some of our views, unknown to us, may not be correct.

Let’s begin with an understanding of how “bias” is defined: Conscious prejudicial beliefs, attitudes, and stereotypes held toward groups of people based on actual or perceived shared characteristic or identity.

Another definition: Prejudice in favor of, or against, one thing, person, or group compared to another.

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We need to ask ourselves: Where do these biases originate?

Biases originate in our unconscious. We have approximately 11 million bits of data per second running through our brain with only 40 bits per second being able to be processed by our conscious mind. As much as we want to say to ourselves, “I am not biased” or “I do not judge others,” we all do, no matter how educated and aware we may be.

Our bias is formed from our experiences, whether good or bad, healthy or unhealthy. These biases come from our own experiences, media portrayals, family, friends, community, educational institutions – the list goes on and on.

When we accept these beliefs and/or experiences as truth, we can start down a slippery slope. Our belief could be incorrect and untrue. We do not realize that our norm is not true for everyone until challenged. We miss out on getting others’ perspectives. So many times in life, we pay attention to that of the majority or dominant culture and not that of the minority cultures or subcultures.

Are you willing to become more aware of your own unconscious bias? If so consider taking the IAT Implicit Bias Test at https://implicit.harvard.edu. The IAT is a test designed to detect the strength of a person’s automatic associations between concepts and attributes.

Mahzarin Banaji and Tony Greenward developed the Implicit Association Test and wrote the book “Blind Spot: Hidden Biases of Good People.”

The mind is an automatic association-making machine, Banaji said. When we encounter any information – words, pictures, or even complex ideas – related information comes to mind. These associations may be incorrect.

The environment that we are raised in gives us what Banaji calls “social mind bugs” – vividness of memory which plays a role in the skewing of perceptions or decisions.

Think about the movie “The Truman Show.” Jim Carey plays the role of Truman Burbank, adopted and raised by a corporation inside a simulated TV show that revolved around his life, until he discovers it and decides to escape. Truman saw his life through the lens he was provided. Why would he not believe or think his world to be true? Truman began to question what the truth was. What was his truth? Once Truman became aware of his surroundings, he was then able to challenge his norm and begin to see the world through the lens of reality.

When we are able to drop our guard and accept that we don’t fully understand something, we welcome diversity of opinion and can make more objective, rational decisions. It will take intentional action to seek out opinions and facts in order to contextualize and become aware of our own biases.

It’s important once you know of unconscious bias to be able to label what types of bias that are likely to occur that affect not just our personal lives but of the workplace. Are you willing to challenge these biases and not make assumptions?

This is not easy, but it is possible. It starts with becoming aware and being willing to do something about it.

Bias, from Front

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