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What is Unconscious Bias?

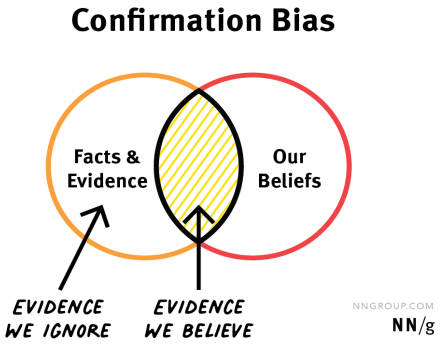
When we collectively use the word bias, we tend to think of it in terms of general preference: "Well, I'm a little biased towards this," is certainly something that we have all heard when talking about something someone favors. The meaning of bias, however, is deeper, particularly in the context of a professional workplace setting. The Oxford Dictionary defines bias as "prejudice in favor of or against one thing, person, or group compares with another, usually in a way considered to be unfair." While most people in a professional setting strive to treat all co-workers, subordinates, and direct reports in an equitable manner, we do not always succeed. One of the biggest barriers that prevents us from reaching this ideal is unconscious bias.

Unconscious bias, also called "workplace bias," relates to the social stereotypes about certain groups of people that individuals form outside their own conscious awareness. Specifically, within the work setting, unconscious bias may affect how individuals interact with other people without the individual even being aware that they are behaving differently. Unconscious bias may also affect social interactions, disciplinary actions, advancement and compensation. Frequently seen types of unconscious bias in the work place include affinity bias, appearance bias, confirmation bias, attribution bias, gender bias, age bias, and authority bias, to name a few.

• **AFFINITY BIAS:** If you have ever thought to yourself, "Oh, this person is just like me!" then you have experienced affinity bias. Affinity bias causes us to like, and in turn disproportionately value, the thoughts and ideas of those whom we perceive to be like us. It hinders us from critically evaluating ideas offered by those we think are like us.

• **APPEARANCE BIAS:** This is where we judge people for how they look. This goes beyond being appropriately dressed in a professional environment. Things like religious garb, cultural hairstyles, tattoos, and piercings may lead us to discount a person or their contributions.

• **CONFIRMATION BIAS:** Confirmation bias is when we interpret new information in a way that already confirms what we believe. In turn, confirmation bias forces us to reject valid new information that clashes with what we believe. In a workplace context, confirmation bias may cause you to discount people or their ideas when disagree with them. "We've always done it this way," is the phrase you might hear from someone whose confirmation bias is limiting them.



• **ATTRIBUTION BIAS:** Attribution bias is correlating people's actions to unrelated and untrue characteristics. An example could be when a co-worker doesn't participate in after-work functions. People may think that they don't care about their job when really, they could be working another job to make ends meet or taking care of their children because they can't afford daycare.

• **GENDER BIAS:** Gender bias is the unintentional association of positive or negative characteristics based on someone's gender. It can also be positively or negatively viewing someone based on how their behavior conforms to gender stereotypes. The classic language you may hear: a man taking charge of a situation may be positively perceived as "assertive," where a woman acting in the same manner in the same situation may be negatively perceived as "bossy."

• **AGE BIAS:** Age bias is when we make judgments about individuals based on their age. While someone with more experience on the job may know more, strictly believing that "older means wiser" and discounting younger employee's ideas demonstrates age bias.

• **AUTHORITY BIAS:** Authority bias is when we place more weight on an authority figure's opinion or idea. The same idea from a law firm partner may be more readily accepted than if pitched by the law firm associate.

These are just a few types of workplace bias that exist in every organization. If you're not looking, you'll likely not see them. To further educate us on how our organization can be more mindful of unconscious bias MBLB has asked Krystal Allen to conduct our training on workplace bias. We hope that this opportunity furthers MBLB's mission of facilitating a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive working environment.