

How bias shows up in your organisation and what you can do about it



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Bias is a tendency to believe that some people, ideas, etc. are better than others, and that usually results in treating some people unfairly. Bias can cause

you to feel or show prejudice for or against someone or something. Biases are often based on gender, age, race, sexual preference or culture.

We all have biases, though many are hidden (unconscious bias). Our first impressions are often affected by our biases. Consider your first impressions when you meet someone who is male, tall, white and professionally dressed, compared with someone who is darker skinned, female and casually dressed. You cannot stop having first impressions; however, you just need to be aware of the impact they have on your assessment of someone the first time you meet them, and through the course of their employment.

IS YOURS A DIVERSE WORKPLACE?

In Australia, 50.2% of the population is female and 64.6% is of non-Australian ancestry. Many workplaces, however, are not reflective of this composition, especially in more senior roles. This means that many businesses do not represent the society we live in and the communities we serve.

Your business should determine whether its workforce reflects its customers. If you want to drive business, you should strive for diversity in your business.

LEADERSHIP NEEDS TO CHAMPION DIVERSITY

There is a strong link between leadership and successful diversity. Leadership is about empowering people and bringing out the best in others. Leaders bring out the best in people by making them feel accepted, respected and connected. When people feel good about themselves and their business, they perform better, both individually and as part of a team. This results in improved business performance.

Research conducted in 2015 by management consulting firm McKinsey & Company shows that gender-diverse companies are 15% more likely to outperform their peers, and ethnically diverse companies are 35% more likely to do the same. Embracing and supporting diverse and inclusive workforces makes sense morally and commercially.

Everyone needs to become more aware of what is taking place in the business.

For example, imagine a common situation: one female candidate and three male candidates are being interviewed for a job. Let's assume there are three interviewers, one of whom is female (although in male-dominated businesses, the interviewers will often all be male). The interviewers will try to be fair and treat all applicants equally. However, they will probably be unaware of biases that can affect their interviewing behaviour and subsequent decision-making about the suitability of each applicant.

5 COMMON BIASES THAT AFFECT CANDIDATE SELECTION

1. In-group bias

This causes you to favour people like yourself, i.e. of the same gender, background, experience, interests or personality type.

2. The halo effect

This causes you to allow the physical characteristics of others to affect your judgement of their other qualities, e.g. physically attractive people are more trustworthy.

3. Anchoring bias

This bias causes you to rely too much on an irrelevant piece of data or belief, e.g. one of the interviewers had previously hired a woman and it turned out badly.

4. Minority pool bias

This causes interviewers to evaluate applicants more negatively if they are from a minority of the applicant pool, in this case the female candidate.

5. Confirmation bias

This causes you to notice data and information that confirms your beliefs, and to disregard data and information that doesn't.



Example: The single female applicant starts out with an initial disadvantage of having the minority gender among the applicants. When interviewed, the male interviewers may see the male applicants as members of their 'in-group' and favour them, consciously or unconsciously. They may see the female applicant as a member of the 'out-group' with characteristics similar to the other women, which may be negative.



CAUTION: Bias can also emerge in performance appraisals, promotion decisions and other decisions about people.

HOW CAN YOU COUNTER BIAS?

Organisations need to examine not just their written policies and procedures, but their current practices in hiring, performance reviews and promotion of staff to make sure biases are not entering into their decision-making.

Consider the following aspects of your organisational culture:

- Do all employees feel included and respected?
- Are there equal development and career opportunities for all employees?
- Are there communication problems among employees of diverse backgrounds?
- Can employees talk openly about their concerns regarding workforce diversity?
- Does the workforce represent the diversity of the community?

LESSONS EVERYONE CAN LEARN

You can become aware of your own biases by:

- undertaking diversity and inclusion training;
- questioning your first impressions and reactions; and
- being aware that individuals and businesses that believe they are objective often exhibit the most bias.

LESSONS FOR LEADERS

If you are a leader, you will play a vital role in countering bias in your business. You should endeavour to lead an organisation that acknowledges bias by taking the following steps:

- encourage your teams to call out bias – start by calling out bias yourself;
- actively solicit input from people, e.g. thank them when bias is noted;
- if you get it wrong in any way, e.g. by talking over a female in a meeting, apologise; and
- encourage your colleagues to become aware of bias. ■

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