

Tackling Unconscious Bias to Create Inclusive Business Environments

The Business Case for Tackling Unconscious Biases Related to Gender

Companies and organizations are making tremendous strides in creating policies that support inclusive and diverse environments; however data shows that women, as well as other minority groups such as ethnic and/or racial minorities, persons with disabilities etc... continue to be underrepresented and face barriers to achieving their full potential. While there are several factors that contribute to this global reality, one factor that is often overlooked is the need to address unconscious biases and implicit associations that can form an unintended and often an invisible barrier, restricting a company's gender equality policies and programmes from reaching their intended mark. To achieve truly inclusive business environments **the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) call on companies to take steps to uncover, raise awareness about, address and reduce unconscious biases throughout their organization, including at the management and leadership levels.**

Why Tackle Unconscious Biases

It makes business sense:

- **A diverse workforce has direct impacts on the bottom line:** Unacknowledged biases can lead to a restricted 'talent pipeline', which can hinder potential opportunities for organizational development and future innovation. To achieve new levels of productivity and innovation, the skills, talents and energies of all employees need to be fully leveraged and developed.
- **Investments in other gender equality initiatives will be less effective:** If root causes of gender inequalities, such as biases and stereotypes, are ignored other gender equality policies and programmes will be unsuccessful or less effective.
- **Allows for creativity, new perspectives, and new ways of working:** Addressing unconscious bias can help to challenge the status quo and current assumptions about what it means to be an effective leaders, managers, and employees. It can promote inclusion and creativity in idea and solution generation, team dynamics, systems and processes, and decision-making.
- **Opportunities to broaden talent pool:** Addressing barriers caused by unconscious biases can lead to additional opportunities for representatives of minority groups to be recruited, promoted and retained.
- **Reduces costs that are associated with a discriminatory work environment:** A discriminatory or perceived to be discriminatory workplace can contribute to higher employee turnover, reputational damages and potentially higher legal costs.
- **Doesn't just benefit women:** identifying unconscious bias is not just good for women, but benefits all people, organizations, business, families, communities, and societies in general.



Unconscious bias refers to automatic associations we make everyday, resulting into judgments, assumptions, and attitudes about each other. It is a neurological process that is informed by individual experience and preference, as well as cultural and societal stereotypes. Biases affect our interpretations, actions and decision-making in ways we are often not aware of. Unconscious biases can show up in all stages of the work life-cycle including: hiring, promotions and even daily interactions with colleagues.

Women's Empowerment Principles

1. Establish high-level corporate leadership for gender equality.
2. Treat all women and men fairly at work – respect and support human rights and nondiscrimination.
3. Ensure the health, safety and well-being of all women and men workers.
4. Promote education, training and professional development for women.
5. Implement enterprise development, supply chain and marketing practices that empower women.
6. Promote equality through community initiatives and advocacy.
7. Measure and publicly report on progress to achieve gender equality.

Photo caption: In 2003, Columbia Business School professor Frank Flynn and New York University professor Cameron Anderson conducted an experiment to test perceptions of men and women in the workplace. Students were given a Harvard Business School case study about an entrepreneur, Heidi Roizen, who became a successful venture capitalists. Half the students read Heidi's story and the other half read the same story, but with the name changed to Howard. The students were asked to select the more appealing colleague. Although the students rated the two equally competent, they voted Howard would be the more appealing colleague because he seemed less selfish. To learn more: <http://www.npr.org/2013/03/11/173740524/lean-in-facebooks-sheryl-sandberg-explains-whats-holding-women-back>



Unconscious Bias Can Effect the Way You:

- Recruit people
- Make hiring decisions
- Conduct initial orientation interviews
- Mentor employees (or not mentor them)
- Make job assignments
- Give people training opportunities
- Treat customers
- Listen to people's ideas and suggestions
- Make promotion choices
- Give performance reviews
- Decide organizational policy
- Conduct marketing campaigns
- Choose board members

How to Tackle Unconscious Bias

- **Recognize That We All Have Bias:** While acknowledging biases is a hard first step, becoming aware of the fact that everyone has them can generate collective responsibility to change. This will benefit all employees in the long run. Becoming aware of unconscious biases is not a process of rationally understanding. It's a process of SEEING the results of i.e. biased evaluations, decision-making, staffing etc and FEELING the need to change behavior.
- **Implement Targeted Training:** Offer targeted training on biases and practical techniques to mitigate these in daily actions for leaders, managers and all other employees to raise awareness of unconscious biases and provide ways to address them. As a starting point, consider encouraging employees, especially management and leadership to take standard or customized Implicit Bias Test.
- **Uncover Individual and Organizational Biases:** Generate individual awareness of biases and their impact on decision-making, as well as organizational biases that have developed over time or as a result of larger societal beliefs. Analyze how these biases are reflected in your organizational culture, systems, structures, and processes. When setting targets like 30% women in leadership implicit associations are creating to 'doing something good for women' and not for business, and 'the women need to be fixed'. By reversing this target to 'maximum 70% of the same gender in teams' as an enabler to high performance other perceptions are created in the unconscious mind; 'this is good for business'. Make it the norm to discuss and address these as part of any decision making process.
- **Evaluate and Adjust Performance and Talent Management Processes:** Consider alternative methods for recruitment, hiring, development, performance evaluation, project assignment, promotion, success planning, etc. Create clear and explicit evaluation and succession processes and criteria that are objective and avoid language that could reinforce mental inferences. Using specific language to describe behaviour and desired outcomes can be an effective way to remain objective. In successor planning, have managers present information to support why a candidate is not ready to assume a position rather than why he or she is ready. This is a model of opting out rather than opting in.
- **Address Micro Behaviors:** Unconscious biases often show up in subtle (micro) behaviors, rather than overt discrimination. Who do we greet in the hallways, how do I listen to different employees, which team members are my go-to people, who do I suggest for a high-profile project assignment? Do I give more guiding gestures to the candidates that are culturally recognizable and fit the implicit norm for competence in my organisation? These small behaviors can create micro-inequities over time.
- **Practice Conscious Awareness:** Surfacing specific unconscious biases with IATs and other cognitive tools can lead people to instinctively change their behaviour. People tend to better control their interpretations, reactions, and decision-making. Research shows 80% of people feel like they are able to take more conscious and objective decisions and change behaviour after identifying their biases.
- **Build Safe Spaces to Discuss:** Provide safe spaces for employees to comfortably talk about stereotypes and biases and to understand the attitudes of colleagues.
- **Measure and Collect Data:** Collect sex-disaggregated data over a period of time to show if gender equality and inclusion programmes and policies are creating systemic change within an organization or if further steps need to be taken to address possible internal biases.
- **Create Counter-Stereotypic Images by Highlighting Data and Achievements:** Highlight specific contributions of both sexes that are contrary to "stereotypical" behaviors or personality traits to help break the stereotype 'spell'.

"Compared to more conscious prejudice and discrimination, the effects of unconscious bias are more subtle, more pervasive and more difficult to change¹" – Centre for Ethical Leadership and Melbourne University, 2012

¹ Centre for Ethical Leadership and Melbourne University. (2012). "Evaluation Bias and Backlash: Dimensions, Predictors and Implications for Organisations." Gender Equality Project. http://www.mbs.edu/facultyresearch/ethicalleadership/Documents/CEL_Unconscious%20Bias%20Report_Briefing%20Note.pdf. Photo credit: Social Accountability Initiative

Company Examples

Anglo American Implements Targeted Training for Supervisors on Unconscious Bias

In 2012, Anglo American ran a series of gender diversity workshops for supervisors across all of its operations in Chile. One of the goals of the workshops was to explain Anglo American's gender diversity strategy, to promote awareness of the company's policy and the reasons for it.

A further objective was to provide a space for open and frank discussion. Participants were encouraged to discuss positive and negative personal

experiences and raise any doubts, questions or concerns about company policies and procedures on gender diversity. For example, in some workshops, male supervisors revealed lingering anxieties about whether they needed to adapt their management style to manage women, while women supervisors took the opportunity to share their personal experiences—good and bad—of working in a male-dominated environment.

Also in 2012, Anglo American MetCoal conducted inclusive leadership workshops in order to engage more than 90 of its senior leaders on the value of gender diversity and the issue of unconscious bias, and held a round-table discussion for its executive leadership team to ensure that those who are responsible for key employment decisions have a mindset that is open to diversity.

Arla Foods Creates Behavioural Change Through Inclusion Nudges

Arla Foods, one of the largest dairy companies in the world, is working with practical techniques, called Inclusion Nudges to mitigate unconscious bias and to achieve an inclusive and innovative collaborative culture that contributes to the global business strategy. During the two-day I&D development session, leaders gain insight into how the unconscious mind influences their leadership, how behavioral patterns and group dynamics affect their collaboration and performance, and how they can change this to strengthen their management and business.

Exercises are designed as inclusion nudges that create a feeling of the need for inclusive behaviour and processes instead of creating a rational understanding with i.e. business cases and rational arguments. These exercises are powerful because they function as eye-openers by illustrating how we tend to evaluate performance, network, who we seek out for input, how we give feedback and more. As a result of these workshops Arla Foods has changed some of their recruitment and promotions practices. These changes include: in recruitment/promotions leaders and managers stop hiring alone, use diverse recruiting teams, divide the interview into two parts, and they design other 'system/process' Inclusion Nudges themselves to mitigate biases. They have also included Inclusion Nudges as part of the performance calibration process.

Google Tackles Hidden Biases

Recognizing the need to address the lack of racial and gender diversity, the global information technology company moved beyond typical diversity trainings to a series of trainings that address the unconscious bias. The trainings, which began last year and have reached more than 49,000 employees, are meant to create systemic change in an organizational culture of male dominance. Google has seen that just by raising awareness on these hidden biases; people's behaviour has changed. "During one recent promotion meeting in which a group of male managers were deciding the fate of a female engineer, a senior manager who had been through the bias training cautioned his colleagues to remember that they were all men — and thus might not be able to fully appreciate the different roles women perform in engineering groups. The woman was promoted."

Beyond trainings, Google plans to measure how biases are affecting the way the company hires people and people's work product.

Toolkit for Addressing Unconscious Bias

1. [Implicit Bias test](#) – *Project Implicit*, 2011
2. [How to Tackle the Unconscious Mind for Inclusive Behavior](#)- *UN Global Compact, Move the Elephant and Inclusion Institute*, 2013
3. [Business Implicit Association Tests](#) – *Diverseo*, 2014

Partner Organizations



The **UN Global Compact** is the world's largest voluntary corporate sustainability initiative, offering guidance to business on how align their operations and strategies with [ten universally accepted principles](#) in the areas of [human rights](#), [labour](#), [environment](#) and [anti-corruption](#). In 2010, the UN Global Compact, in partnership with [UN Women](#), launched the [Women's Empowerment Principles](#) – seven Principles for business on how to empower women in the workplace marketplace and community. Subtitled Equality Means Business, the voluntary principles emphasize the business case for corporate action to promote gender equality and women's empowerment and are informed by real-life business practices and input gathered from across the globe. The Women's Empowerment Principles seek to point the way to best practice by elaborating the gender dimension of corporate responsibility, the UN Global Compact, and business' role in sustainable development. As well as being a useful guide for business, the Principles seek to inform other stakeholders, including governments, in their engagements with business.



Cook Ross, Inc. is a globally recognized, woman-owned consulting firm specializing in diversity and inclusion, leadership development, and organizational change management initiatives. Recognizing diversity as a global imperative for organizational success that needs to be effectively managed, Cook Ross has provided training, strategic vision, executive coaching, and organizational development solutions to hundreds of organizations from around the world.



Diverseo is a cognitive bias advisor, providing global consulting and training services in diversity, leadership, and ethics. Leveraging its unique partnerships with eminent researchers, Diverseo's scientific approach integrates the latest advances in cognitive science, Big Data and technology to help organizations enhance quality of decision making and to shift mindsets. Diverseo's clients both in the private and public sector in 25 countries have obtained significant results in transforming their cultures to better integrate diverse talents and markets.



Inclusion Institute is focused on tailored consulting, coaching, training, and research for inclusive organizations. We integrate organizational development expertise with diversity and inclusion to drive change at all levels, from the individual to the systemic, bringing a depth and breadth on diversity and inclusion dimensions. Experienced working at country, regional, and global levels, and working with executive leadership teams, HR and D&I practitioners, and one-to-one coaching, and across multiple languages.



The social-economic organisation **Move The Elephant For Inclusiveness** was founded in 2013 by anthropologist Tinna C. Nielsen. The organisation's mission is to create a global movement of sharing practical techniques called Inclusion Nudges, to promote systemic, cultural, and behavioural changes for more inclusive organisations worldwide. The surplus of the organisation is used for this purpose - enabling internal practitioners to master these powerful techniques to mitigate biases in decision-making, leadership and collaboration.