



Unconscious Bias...

and what to
do about it

Participant Handbook

Conscious Prejudice

We all have prejudice (pre-judgement) about some characteristics in other people that can trigger the stereotypes we have stored in our memory. These stereotypes can have their origin in:

- The wider society around us: in the media, culture, education system, etc.
- Our personal experiences: our family as we grew up, friends and colleagues, direct personal encounters

What we can do about it

- **Identify** what your prejudices are and where they came from – own them, don't hide them!
- **Educate** yourself – swap your assumptions with facts by researching the characteristic that triggers you and, if it is possible and ok with them, by getting to know someone with that characteristic, going beyond your pre-judged image to the real person behind it.

Unconscious Bias

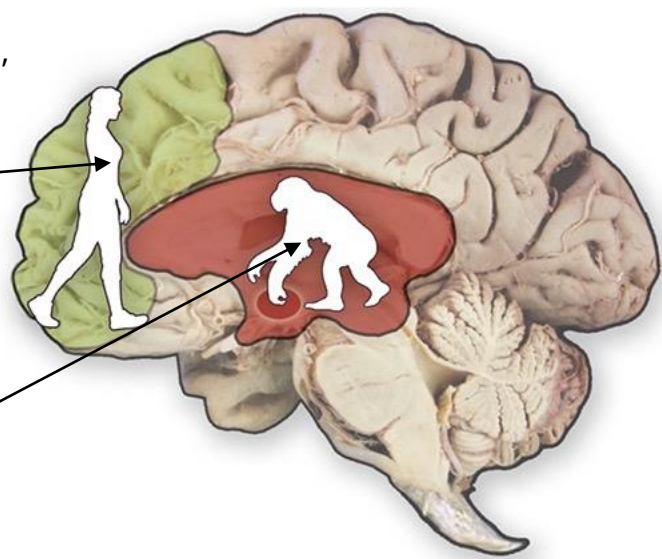
The functioning of the automatic parts of our brain can produce distortions in the way we think and perceive the world around us. Being aware of these cognitive biases helps us to minimise the negative effects they can have on our decision making.

Pre-Frontal Neo Cortex

The 'human', rational part of our brain, responsible for reason, logic and judgement. It uses up so much of our body's resources that it is only used when really necessary – it is lazy!

The Limbic System

The animal, 'chimp' part of our brain, responsible for keeping us alive through our fight, flight, freeze mechanism. It is much faster and stronger than the human.



Remember:

The human is lazy and the chimp is strong. It is not that the chimp is bad and the human good. We need the emotional and rational sides of our brain to work together, to balance each other out. But, more often than we'd like to think, it is the chimp that is guiding our decisions about people and situations, especially when it is on high alert or agitated, such as when it is:

- **Rushed** – in need of a quick decision
- **Tired** – the human is far less likely to get a look in
- **Emotional** – if your chimp is angry or upset, it is in automatic fight, flight, freeze mode
- **Hungry** – if your glucose levels are depleted, you may not have the energy to power your human brain, giving free-reign to your chimp



Source: PosterEnvy

These are the Danger Zones

Cognitive Biases

There are over 150 different biases listed in the literature but 5 are particularly important for your work because they affect the way you interact with your colleagues:

- **Stereotype Bias** – our chimp works with highly simplified ‘thumbnails’ of types of people, to make a quick decision on whether they are likely to be a threat or an opportunity. Just a few characteristics are enough to categorise people and



Source: Getty / abd-rodrigo / Martin Klimek / ZUMA Press / Alamy

society provides us with some readymade ‘thumbnails’ that are often ingrained from our early lives, such as gender, racial and age-related stereotypes. Your chimp can access these and influence your behaviour before your human gets a chance to weigh-up the actual person in front of you.

- **Confirmation Bias** – once your chimp has made its first assessment of someone, it is much easier to hold onto this belief than to change it. You will tend only to notice those things that confirm your beliefs about a person and to unconsciously disregard anything that goes against it. This is the halo or horns effect and it can make it very difficult for someone to demonstrate their true potential.



- **Affinity Bias** – we are drawn to people with whom we feel an affinity – our ‘in-group’, and to avoid people who are in our ‘out-group’. We are less likely to consider their needs and value their opinions. Over time, this tends to narrow the diversity of an organisation’s talent pool and can contribute to:



- **Group Think** – the tendency for a group to conform in their thinking and to disregard ‘rebel ideas’, particularly under the influence of hierarchy dynamics, where the ideas of the most ‘powerful’ will dominate. It often leads to poor decision making and missed opportunities.



- **Presence Bias** – the tendency to be more focussed on people or things that are right in front of you and forget about those that are not – ‘out of sight, out of mind’. This could become a particular problem now, when hybrid working means that people are not always present in the office.



Source: Getty / Martin Klimek

Further Reading

For a full list of cognitive biases:
[Click Here](#)

Making The Unconscious More Conscious

You can do this by:

- doing an **Implicit Association Test**. This is an online test, developed by Harvard University, to identify unconscious biases towards or away from a range of characteristics. Its validity is still the subject of debate, but it can give a useful insight into areas where you need to be particularly careful to reduce potential bias. The book 'Blindspot' in the reading list below, charts the development of the IAT.



You can take the tests by clicking the link below. Please note:

- from the dropdown menu, choose the country most relevant you
- you will need to allow good time as you will be asked to do a series of 'calibration' tests first
- be prepared to be stressed – it is designed to trigger your chimp!

[Click Here](#)

- looking out for **Golden Nuggets**. These are moments when you realise that you have made an incorrect assumption about someone because of an unconscious bias you have. Remember that this could be a positive or negative assumption that turned out to be wrong. You may be shocked by and even ashamed of the mistake you made but get over that quickly and see it as a valuable golden nugget of insight into your unconscious mind and one that can help remind you of where you need to take extra care.



Source: GoGraph

These can both help you identify your Hot Spots

These are particular characteristics in other people (race, age, religion, accent, hair colour, etc.) That you know are likely to trigger a negative or positive bias in you.



What we can do about it

We can't be constantly alert to our biases and taking steps to reduce their impact. That would be utterly exhausting because these unconscious processes never stop. But we can identify key points when we do need to take action to reduce bias:

- When the action or decision could have a significant impact on another person
- When you are in a **Danger Zone** (rushed, tired, emotional, hungry)
- When you are interacting with someone in your **Hot Spot**

THEN YOU NEED TO SLOW THINGS DOWN!

You need to create some space, to allow your human to catch up and check out your chimp's reaction. Here's an example you may be familiar with:

You receive an email and something in it really annoys you, you might be furious. You want to reply immediately, telling them exactly what you think. But you don't. You wait, let it sink in for an hour or so, maybe even overnight and then you draft a response.

Unleashing an angry chimp is very tempting but it can cause a lot of unnecessary damage. We need to check our emotional response with some rational thinking, and this can take a little longer to achieve.

Using Inclusion Nudges

We need to apply this approach to other areas of our working lives and we can do this using **nudges**. These are small, practical actions you can take that influence your behaviour or others', without them really thinking about it. No one likes being told what to do, but we can shape behaviour with a gentle nudge in the right direction.

Personal Nudges

- Use a **keyword or action** - a word like 'pause' or an action like taking a deep breath
- Find a **trusted person**, someone who will be objective and ask their opinion – use their human to check your chimp.



- Use **counter stereotype images** - if you know that a certain characteristic triggers bias in you – maybe age, skin colour, gender, find an image of a person that completely contradicts the stereotype and have it around you – on the office wall, as your laptop or phone wallpaper. There is plenty of research showing that exposure to such positive images can influence our subconscious attitudes. ('Blindspot', Chapter 8 – see reading list below)



Marissa Mayer

Michelle Obama

Albert Einstein

Source: Martin Klimek / ZUMA Press / Monica Schipper/Filmmagic/Getty Images

- Use **intention implementation planning** - if you are aware of an unconscious bias you have, develop a self-talk script for yourself :
 - a **goal intention** – e.g. “I will not be prejudiced”.
 - and**
 - an **implementation intention plan** – e.g. “If I see a dark face, then I’ll ignore the skin colour.”

Repeating these statements before an interaction will tend to reduce biased responses.

(‘The Value of Difference’, Chapter 6 – See Reading List Below)
- **Mindfulness** is an excellent way to learn how to be more aware of your own thought processes and slow down your automatic responses to the world.

Team Nudges - Meetings / Decision Making – Avoiding Groupthink

- **Allow Different Ways To Register Ideas**
Build in a variety of ways to gather ideas, proposals, evaluations, etc. E.g. people can submit in writing in advance, everybody writes on a post-it at the beginning of a meeting (before discussion) and all ideas are read out, breaking up a meeting into pairs for discussion.



- **Golden Silence**

At the beginning of meetings, all participants are asked to read a carefully drafted document summarising the important issues to be discussed. This is done in silence, giving everyone time to digest and consider their own responses. When the discussion begins, the most senior person speaks last. This approach has been described as one of the most important strategic advantages of one of the world's most successful companies – Amazon.

- **Taking a 5-minute brain break**

Choose key moments in your meetings, e.g. after a long discussion and before you move to make a decision, and allow a 5 minute break. This is not a tea break or a time to check emails, this is 5 minutes for everyone to do whatever relaxes and 'grounds' them – a short walk round the office or outside, a mindfulness exercise, reading a few pages or listening to some music, for example.

- **Re-fuelling**

As your brain uses up its reserves of glucose, your ability to over-ride biases and make rational, evidence-based decisions is impaired. Provide some means of people topping up their energy at key points. Be aware of the diversity of your team (health issues, personal preferences, etc.) and offer a range of refreshments.

- **Bias Busting**

When you reconvene following a 5-minute Brain Break or Re-fuelling break, take a few minutes for everyone to consider if they think any biases or unevidenced assumptions have crept into the meeting discussion.

- **Allocating Someone To Be The Sceptic**

A team member is given the role of Sceptic. They question all decisions and ideas to ensure that proper consideration has been given. Rotate the role so that you don't end up with a permanent sceptic!

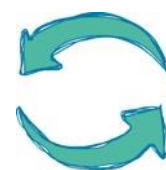


- **Engaging An Outside Eye**

Invite someone from outside the team to observe the meeting and give objective feedback on content and process.

- **Argue For The Other**

If clear groups are forming around ideas, ask the groups to swap ideas temporarily and develop arguments to support the opposing idea.



- **Silent Sense Check**
Once a decision has been reached, ask everyone to write down a summary of their understanding. Check the notes to see that everyone has the same understanding.
- **Use Checklists**
To make sure people aren't inadvertently excluded from events or processes, develop checklists of the considerations necessary for inclusion.

Organisation Nudges - Selection / Recruitment Processes

- **Group Interview**
Interview groups of candidates together. This counteracts our tendency to evaluate against the 'norm' (the unconscious image in our head of what we like or feel comfortable with) and nudges us to evaluate against other candidates. It is important to get a good balance of candidates in the group to avoid minorities feeling inhibited.
- **Two-Part Interview**
After the standard interview, the panel retire to make a quick evaluation of strengths and weaknesses and further questions they would like to ask the candidate. They also flag any implicit associations they have noticed and challenge these by asking questions like "if she was a 'he', would we have thought the same?", etc. The panel re-join the candidate to ask further questions and conduct an evaluation of the interview.
- **Use 'Norming Statements'**
This is similar to Intention Implementation Planning above. Each member of a panel is given a statement to read before interviewing. It reminds them of the value of diversity, etc. and has a statement reminding them of **their** role in achieving that e.g.
'Every member of the interview panel plays an important role in recruiting the best candidate for the job / promotion by making an objective evaluation.'
- **Interrupter Bell**
Panel members have a hotel reception type bell, which they ring whenever they feel that the discussion is based on assumptions or biases about the candidate, rather than evidence. This can also be used in any talent development / review context.
- **Inclusion / Exclusion Selection Methodology**
Starting with a blank list and selecting people who meet the selection criteria is much less likely to trigger unconscious biases and stereotyping than starting with a full list and excluding those who don't meet them.



- **Advertising Posts**

This is a big issue and you should seek full guidance on the impact of unconscious processes in job postings, but here are two examples:

- Focus on a short list of essential job requirements, rather than a long list of 'desirables' – women are likely to apply only if they feel they meet at least 85% of the requirements, for men the figure is 40 – 60%.
- Try putting your proposed text into the gender decoder:
[click here](#)

Whole-Team Nudges

- **Outgroup Contact**

The best way to reduce prejudice towards another, 'out' group is to enable contact – to 'humanise' them. If there is conflict between different teams, find a way of them getting an insight into each other's worlds. Do they know what each other's issues, difficulties, achievements are? The best conditions for this exchange are ones in which all parties:

- Have equal status
- Share common goals
- Are ready to cooperate
- See it as important
- Have the support of the 'authorities'

('The Value of Difference', Chapter 6 – See Reading List Below)

Further Reading:

The Chimp Paradox. Prof Steve Peters, London: Vermilion, 2012

Thinking, Fast And Slow. Daniel Kahnemann, London: Penguin, 2011

Inclusion Nudges Guidebook. Tinna C. Nielsen, Lisa Kepinski. Amazon, 2016

The End of Bias. Jessica Nordell, London: Granta, 2021

The Value Of Difference – Eliminating Bias In Organisations. Binna Kandola, Oxford: Pearn Kandola, 2009

Blindspot – Hidden Biases Of Good People. Mahzarin R. Banaji, Anthony G. Greenwald, New York: Delacorte Press, 2013

Inclusion Self-Assessment

On the following page is a template for the Inclusion Self-Assessment. In the left-hand column, write down the initials of your team members. You have room for up to 8 on this sheet. Consider the inclusive behaviours across the top row and score yourself from 1 to 5 (1 is low and 5 is high) for each member of staff. Don't spend too long thinking about it and go with your first instinct. When you have completed the grid, add up the scores down the right-hand column for each team member and across the bottom row for each behaviour. Do any scores stand out as significantly lower? Is there a reasonable justification for this difference? If not, then you know the staff members and behaviours that deserve particular attention in your work to develop a more inclusive team.

If you're not a manager you may need to adapt the Inclusion Behaviours.

If you are a manager – do you feel brave enough to give one of these to your team members and ask them to score you for each of these behaviours? It could give you valuable guidance on where to focus your efforts.

Inclusion self-assessment – score 1 (low) to 5 (high)

INDIVIDUAL (initials)	How well do I know them as a person?	How much 'face time' do I give them?	How much do I know about their working preferences?	How likely am I to trust them with an important task?	How likely am I to ask them for feedback on my leadership?	SCORE
SCORE						

My change commitments

Don't forget to talk to your
check-in partner!