

Unconscious Bias

Canadian Aviation Pride
Fierté en aviation canadienne



We now look at one of the main obstacles to achieving the goal of having both Diversity and Inclusion incorporated into an organization's culture.

One of the more important concepts in understanding Diversity and Inclusion is the recognition that all of us as humans unconsciously process vast amounts of data every day, and we rely on past experience, lessons learned, information passed on, and a wide range of sometimes accurate, sometimes barely accurate and even totally incorrect assumptions, to do this unconscious decision-making. It is often called 'unconscious bias'.

The study of unconscious bias is about human behaviour. Actually, "unconscious bias" is probably a misnomer because it gives rise to defensiveness ("I'm not biased"). We are not talking about rampant open prejudice in most cases, and it is also not about a 'blame game'. All people have unconscious bias, or more accurately put, we make unconscious assumptions about most things in life, largely because our brains couldn't process the number of decisions required on a daily basis if we had to make them all consciously.

Ever driven from work to home and wondered afterwards how you did it because you can't remember a thing about the drive? Our unconscious brain was making assumptions all the time – traffic volumes, alternate routes, time of day, which lane to be in, whether to move over for merging traffic, and so on. It is a normal way for the brain to function, and most of those assumptions are astonishingly accurate.

Where the problem arises is when those assumptions, mostly from much earlier in life and never really challenged, are about people. We read a 'foreign' name and make instinctive assumptions about nationality or language, we make assumptions based on race about education or skills, we assume that a physical handicap translates into a mental one, or that a particular age group will have predictable attitudes. Most of these assumptions are incorrect, and can cause problems if one is not vigilant in recognizing the situation and noticing where one's mind is going.

So you go into a room to meet the CEO of a large company and two junior assistants. You see a middle-aged man in a suit and two mid-thirties women in business attire. Did you just make an assumption as to who is the CEO? If so, welcome to unconscious bias!

D & I programs do not really work if they are just a shopping list of action items (we need four training sessions, three employee resource groups, two surveys, one newsletter and a partridge in the proverbial pear tree!). That's not to say that these action items are not important - they are, but they are tools to achieve the end result, which is imbedding in the company culture the concepts of being open to different ways of thinking, different ideas, that it is okay to have people around us who are very different from us, that everyone has a voice and should be able to contribute, and it is about making this thought process "how we do business" at all levels of the organization. It takes hard work rethinking a lot of processes and procedures, and trying to overcome the inevitable unconscious biases. There are definitely some similarities to SMS implementation - it's a culture shift.

Let's now start looking at some practical areas where we can make a difference. ■