



Implicit Bias: I Know It Exists. Now What?

A Diversity and Inclusion White Paper



SpectraDIVERSITY

Powering Inclusive Cultures

ABOUT US



Spectra Diversity is a diversity and inclusion company providing products and tools for those working in the diversity and inclusion field. Partner Amy Tolbert, Ph.D., CSP, was the co-creator of the Discovering Diversity Profile® (DDP). From 1994 – 2015 the DDP was the only valid reliable instrument in the market specifically designed as a learning instrument that helped individuals learn how they respond to diversity issues and where they need to develop increased understanding and skills. Jonamay Lambert was the co-creator of the RespectAbility Self-Assessment Diagnostic Tool. Chris Jones is an internationally recognized writer of all forms of media. Patricia Jesperson brings her experience of working with ProGroup (now KornFerry), a national leader in Diversity and Inclusion services.

Together, our four Spectra Diversity partners have careers rich in diversity and inclusion efforts, while working with clients ranging from corporate leaders to non- profits, and from Fortune 100 companies to storied educational institutions and entrepreneurial start-ups. We are a women-owned business. We are committed to this work.

Our Mission: Spectra Diversity is committed to honoring differences and helping others to create a diverse and inclusive workforce.

OVERVIEW

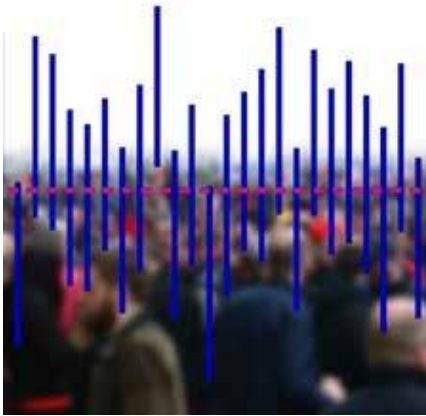
***“The eye sees only
what the mind is
prepared to
comprehend.”***

~ Robertson Davies

While implicit bias is not an intentional choice, biases inevitably exist and affect the workplace environment significantly if not addressed. Holding biases unconsciously can be frustrating, let alone understanding how to address such biases. However, during the past two decades of neuroscience and behavioral research, there has been a deepening understanding of the most effective ways to address such biases in the workplace: be it through models, increased awareness, corporate training initiatives or long-term culture changes.

In this paper, research by leading business consultants will be explored to explain the necessity of understanding and addressing implicit bias in the workplace, as well as exploring potential paths of action for your workplace.

DEFINITIONS



Let's start by defining some of the terms that will be used consistently throughout this paper, so there is a shared foundation of understanding.



Implicit (unconscious) bias

Bias in behavior and/or judgment that results from subtle cognitive processes and occurs a level below a person's conscious awareness, without intentional or conscious control. Implicit bias is based in the subconscious and can be developed over time because of the natural accumulation of personal experiences.



IAT

Acronym for "implicit association test" which, since 1998 has been a measure within social psychology designed to detect the strength of a person's automatic association between mental representations of objects (concepts) in memory.



Mindfulness

The practice of maintaining a non-judgmental state of heightened or complete awareness of one's thoughts, emotions, or experiences on a moment-to-moment basis. ¹

THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING IMPLICIT BIAS IN THE WORKPLACE



The brain processes billions of stimuli a day. It will call on established biases to quickly process all that is registering in the brain to categorize and understand this information. ² Much of this processing, however, is done on an unconscious level. Therefore, an individual is often not aware of the biases that are involved in their choices, be it a routine everyday encounter or an important hiring decision. As Andrea Choate, author, HR executive and Strategist, explains: "Unconscious bias directly affects not only who gets hired, developed and promoted but also the ability of a team to be high performing, the effectiveness of leadership decision making, the health or lack thereof of an organization's culture, and ultimately, the success of an organization." ³ Clearly, even if below the level of the conscious, implicit bias can have far-reaching effects. Potentially, biases can negatively affect an organization. It is vital to not only understand how implicit biases occur, but also how to best address them in the workplace.

This paper will discuss the potential opportunities to address implicit bias in the workplace. The first step is to increase awareness that brains are wired towards the tendency of holding bias. Further, as neuroscientist David Rock advises, organizations should "identify the various types of bias likely to be present in their workplace." ⁴ Only then can the workplace, as a collective, make an intentional effort to mitigate the negative impacts those biases may have on its work. Identifying existing biases is important not only to the design of workplace education, but also to determine if the biases present in the workplace exist on an individual or organizational level, or both. A key aspect of analyzing biases within the workplace includes developing a clear understanding of how the biases are negatively impacting the success of individuals, teams and the organization.

TYPES OF BIASES

There are more than 150 types of implicit bias that are common in the workplace.⁵ While it is possible for many biases to be present in a workplace, the outlined bias types below are the most commonly held by both individuals but also as an organization. Organizations often proclaim to have a set of core values, but without consistent company-wide training and reinforcement, the workplace culture will not naturally reflect those values.

Just stating that bias exists is not enough. If a bias is held on an organizational level, the bias is much more pervasive, effectively impacting the work environment negatively. As Michael Brainard, of the Brainard Strategy echoes, “our collective, implicit biases, which are far stronger and more devious than our individuals explicit and/or implicit biases, have effects that are far-reaching with organizational and societal impact.”⁶

Often, it is helpful to look to the demographics represented in the workplace: under or overrepresentation in any specific department or role can be an important cue of company-held, implicit bias in the workplace.⁷







Launching a four-person software company, scaling, recruiting and finding customers is a challenge; this aside, Laura Gómez also had to struggle with being a woman and an immigrant entrepreneur. Atipica secured \$2 million in seed funding. Laura pointed out there were biases on the other side of raising money, and that in general, women entrepreneurs must come to the table a lot more prepared. She associates the lack of funding received by women to not just people’s biases, but also to the severe lack of female entrepreneurs in general.⁸

Emails sent to faculty members at universities, asking to talk about research opportunities, were more likely to get a reply if a stereotypically white name was used.⁹

***Everyone is a
prisoner of his
(sic.) own
experiences. No
one can eliminate
prejudices — just
recognize them.***

~ Edward Roscoe
Morrow

Some of the most common biases to be found in the workplace are outlined below¹⁰:

-  Affinity Bias: The tendency to prefer or like those like oneself; this type of bias is understood through the lens of race, age, gender, religion, etc.
-  Halo Effect: A tendency to use one trait about a person or thing to make an overall judgment. We judge specific traits positively, such as where someone went to school, and use that to make an overall judgment about their performance that is also positive.
-  Confirmation Bias: The tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms one's preexisting beliefs or hypotheses, while giving disproportionately less consideration to, or ignoring information that challenges our preconceived notions.
-  Truth Illusion: As we are exposed to a message repeatedly, it becomes more familiar. Because of the way our minds work, what is familiar seems true. Familiar things require less effort to process and that feeling of cognitive ease signals truth.
-  Mere Exposure Effect: People tend to develop a preference for things merely because they are familiar. The more exposure we have to a stimulus the more we will tend to like it, even unconsciously.
-  Priming Effect: Priming is an implicit memory effect in which exposure to a stimulus influences a response to a later stimulus. Your actions and your emotions can be primed by events of which you are not even aware.



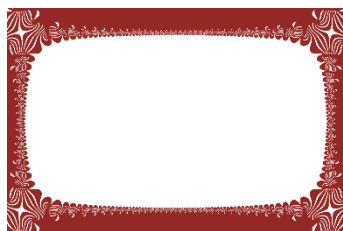
Many of these biases are based in conformity of thought. So, we know that implicit bias exists, and we know different types of biases that are common to the workplace: but what does this mean? As biases prioritize the familiar, workplaces with pervasive bias are significantly affected. Decision making which favors a bias can hinder creativity and innovative approaches to a problem or project.

For example, if the leader of a team continues to listen to one team member over the others because unconsciously they relate more to and, therefore, trust this person, the work will reflect that. There are missed opportunities when we allow implicit biases to keep us in what we unconsciously associate as “comfortable” or “trustworthy.”

Beyond lack of innovation, implicit biases create exclusivity in a way that can create unhealthy workspaces. The work environment must foster growth and teamwork amongst employees to effectively complete tasks and projects. If there is an establishment of trust and equitable opportunity among employees, space is created for risks and creative solutions to be proposed which will help the organization.

When doctors were shown patient histories, and asked to make judgments about heart disease, they were much less likely to recommend cardiac catheterization (a helpful procedure) to black patients — even when their medical files were statistically identical to those of white patients.¹¹

ADDRESSING IMPLICIT BIAS: TIPS AND BEST PRACTICES



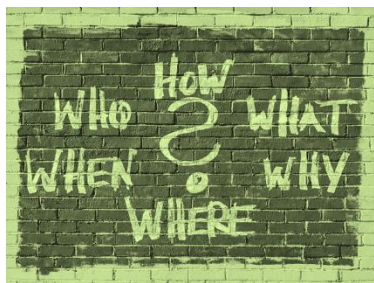
Implicit bias is a neurological fact of being human. While it is uncomfortable and difficult to address, the fact that bias exists in everyone’s unconscious is a good base to understand, unpack and address biases in the workplace. Now that implicit bias, and its impact on the work environment, has been contextualized: what’s next? How can you address implicit bias in the most effective way?

Framing the beginning conversation is a great first step. Since implicit bias is a part of the brain’s wiring, it is not something with which to demonize your team. While bias, even toxic behaviors, must be addressed, beginning a conversation in the affirmative manner can help set a better tone. Rather than lecturing on why implicit bias is bad, or placing blame: think of this as an opportunity.

What are your company’s goals in the next year? Five years? Ten years? How can, or how could, having more gender-balanced teams – for example – help the company reach those goals?

As conversations around implicit bias training are proposed, this framing around goals, rather than punishments, will not only help leaders invest in the initiative, but provide a more open, safe training space for those diving into the discomfort of implicit bias. Think of this work as affirmative: leading rather than pushing.¹² To take lead from Professor Gino at the Harvard Business School, “the idea is to create an ‘organizational conversation’ about biases and help spark ideas on ‘steps the organization can take to minimize them.’”¹³

Noticing and working to minimize implicit bias in the workplace happens on many levels. By consciously and openly discussing biases, shifts can occur as a result: in the individual, one’s own self-awareness, the hiring process, the standard training of team members, and - ideally - the culture of the entire organization.



After this beginning conversation is established, the work continues. Everyday use of language can show potential implicit biases as well. Language is an effective, but also oppressive tool. It is vital to be aware of the different access people have to language based on background. “All speakers of a language are influenced by the dynamics of dominant and subordinated group membership. If you are a white heterosexual man, your experience of language will be different from a black woman or a gay Asian man.” ¹⁴

Language is tied to the histories of people and, therefore, privilege and a different understanding of language is bound to come up. Therefore, intentional word choice and accessible language is vital when discussing and working through implicit bias. Words can even have gendered connotations, which as Professor Bohnet of Harvard Kennedy School, points out can be a downfall. Not only is gender-equitable or gender-neutral language crucial in the work environment itself, but specific language choices in job descriptions can change your applicant pool. Words such as “efficient” or “strong” versus “collaborative” will affect the number of women, typically, who would apply for a position. ¹⁵ It can be helpful, when addressing gender biases in the workplace to examine word use in everyday communications. Seeing how biases can affect even minute choices can help one understand its deeply ingrained, even if subtle, impact.

Laura Gómez’s journey to becoming one of leading voices of immigration, tech and workforce diversity is a beautiful one that teaches aspiring entrepreneurs the importance of the goal-oriented, altruistically driven hard work. Laura’s struggle began as an undocumented immigrant from Mexico when she moved to the US at the age of 10, during an international amnesty program. A victim of regular racial stereotyping, she was often an outsider, even though she grew up in liberal parts of Redwood City.

Having worked at HP at the age of 17, before even going to college, Laura was advised to attend the Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Sciences (EECS) at Berkeley (CA). However, her desire to create change for women, as well as the feeling of being one of the only women in an overwhelming crowd of male computer science students drove Laura to pivot. She pursued Sociology, Latin American Studies and Development Studies at undergraduate and graduate levels. ¹⁶

***“We find comfort
among those who
agree with us -
growth among
those who don’t.”***

~ Frank Clark

On an organizational level, there are practical implementations that can be made to address common workplace biases. As Prof. Bohnet suggests in the hiring process, “think broadly about ways to broaden and standardize the process.” ¹⁷

A male job applicant was sending out 50-100 resumes a day to jobs he felt he was qualified for. Despite the large amount of resumes he was sending out daily, he did not receive any callbacks or responses. He decided to make just one, seemingly small, yet highly significant change. He dropped one letter of his first name, from José to Joe. The results were startling – a week later his inbox was full. ¹⁸

By creating a standard measure for processes of hiring, the inclination for biases is significantly lowered. Blind resume reviews, work sample tests and standardized interview questions are some small changes that can help in the standardization of that process. Organizations can increase awareness of the subtle ways unconscious biases impact their hiring and talent management processes. The hiring is where it begins; the more difficult challenge is to create an inclusive culture that embraces differences and retains the talent in the organization.

Laura ended up working at Twitter during its early stages, quickly climbing the ladder from an International Lead Support to the Head of Localization. As a founding member of Twitter's international team, she could lead product development into 50+ languages in dozens of countries. Having contributed a similar experience at Jawbone, she was able to get a first-hand view of gender and ethnicity issues in the tech world. She decided it was time to work on her own venture – this is what gave birth to Atipica.

Atipica is a talent discovery engine that uniquely combines AI (artificial intelligence) with human intelligence to allow companies to discover the value of the talent they're hiring, based on recruiting data. Its mission, perhaps driven directly by Laura's experiences of being outcast, is to "surface the unique person behind the resume by interpreting data through an empathetic lens." ¹⁹

MAKING THE UNCONSCIOUS CONSCIOUS



***"Let us be a little
humble; let us
think that the
truth may not
perhaps be entirely
with us."***

~ Jawaharlal Nehru

While there are important organizational ways to address bias through training and standardization, addressing implicit bias long-term can also create a shift in the culture of the workplace. As Steve Simpson writes, addressing implicit bias "is less about work activities, strategies and initiatives, and more about the behaviors that people display in their day-to-day work in the many and various interactions at play." ²⁰

So how can an organization help individuals make the unconscious, conscious? One strategy for organizations is to provide training and opportunities to make unfamiliar differences more familiar. We need strong workplace relationships to build trust. The brain unconsciously registers differences that are unfamiliar or uncomfortable as a potential threat, making it more difficult to build trust and rapport. Providing opportunities to engage across differences in ways that are positive increase our understanding of differences and helps build trust. Sharing stories can help engage across differences and open the communication.

How can individuals notice and manage unconscious biases effectively? How can we be more intentional in demonstrating inclusive behaviors? Neuroscience tells us that one must engage the prefrontal cortex, or higher brain. This part of the brain helps one connect current actions to future consequences (providing conscience). It helps one determine both similarities and differences between people, things or events. Therefore, this "higher brain" plays a critical role in one's ability to demonstrate inclusive behaviors consistently.

The higher brain is where one can:

- 🌐 Think about one's thinking
- 🌐 Increase and maintain high levels of self-awareness
- 🌐 Recognize biases to manage and consciously re-pattern them
- 🌐 Understand the impact of one's behavior on others
- 🌐 Engage empathy, curiosity and understanding
- 🌐 Create connections with others that are outside of one's comfort zone. ²¹

PAUSE ||

Try this process:

- Pause. Take three slow deep breaths – focusing on relaxing your muscles. Talk yourself through the moment: is this a threatening moment or is that just habit?
- Stop and take a moment to do a simple focused task.
- Engage your short-term memory and recall a positive situation. Again, this will help the brain get out of the deeper “recording” causing the stress reaction and get to the “higher brain state” where you can consciously choose your response.²⁴
- Reflect - when the stress has passed, remember to intentionally reflect on where that feeling came from and how to address it more proactively in the future. This will help you re-write the internal recording and choose a new response path.

The higher brain is vital in being inclusive, in noticing and managing unconscious bias. Yet the higher brain also contains a central challenge – it becomes destabilized very easily, often outside of conscious awareness. Stress, pressure, urgency, negative emotions and strong reactions can all destabilize the higher brain, and when this happens, lower brain states dominate thinking and perceptions.²² One becomes less aware of biases and is even more likely to act on them unconsciously. The good news is that individuals can learn to recognize when stress takes over and the higher brain is destabilized - essentially gone offline. What are some of the things we can do to consciously re-engage the higher brain? Here are a few skills and techniques:

Know yourself and your reactions. Learn to recognize when the higher brain has gone offline and lower brain states have taken over. There are physiological cues that are indicators that lower brain reactions are taking over, such as:

- Changes in heart rate
- Breathing quickens
- Body temperature rises
- Muscles tense
- Jaw clenches or tightens.

Here are some suggestions to get the higher brain back on line.

Pause and begin slow deep breaths to calm the body’s physiology. This will help the muscles relax, increase oxygen flow and slow down lower brain reactions. Reflect on positive feelings from the past; recall and focus on positive situations which will help stabilize the higher brain and help regain conscious control. Engage short term memory by focusing on a specific routine task. Short term memory is associated with the higher brain; taking a moment to focus on a task can help facilitate a shift back to the higher brain.²³

That sounds easy enough, but it’s rather complex to manage. Commit to monitoring personal reactions to situations for one week. Use the worksheet provided in the appendix. Individuals can learn to be more self-aware in moments of stress, where it’s natural for biases to kick in and override more conscious reactions. Notice the stressful moments where the biased “flight, fight or freeze” response automatically takes over. It is your unconscious, but you do not lack control.

If you can learn to recognize it, it is no longer unconscious; you can ask why are you reacting that way and then choose your response. Through intentional personal practice, these biases can be easily understood and managed. These personal adjustments can provide examples and stories for more meaningful dialogue about how to be inclusive in the workplace. By embracing the discomfort of unlearning and relearning through implicit biases, others can become more open to the opportunity to relearn, rather than seeing this process as a burden.²⁵

Today’s neuroscience research provides more information about unconscious brain dynamics that feed into biases and assumptions. We know more now about how to positively influence the unconscious, take more control over our actions and shape a more inclusive work culture. By applying one specific technique – showing sincere appreciation – it helps keep the brain tipped toward open-mindedness and curiosity which directly supports the ability to engage with others across differences more effectively.



How do we show more sincere appreciation? Micro-affirmations are one example of an everyday practice to build habits of appreciation that can aid in shifting workplace culture. As Mary P. Rowe, Ph.D., Adjunct Professor at MIT Sloan School of Management says, micro-affirmations “are tiny acts of opening doors to opportunity, gestures of inclusion and caring, and graceful acts of listening.”²⁶

These gestures can take many forms:

- 🌈 Mentoring a young team member who may have been overlooked in the past
- 🌈 Asking for (and being open to) feedback after a meeting from the larger group
- 🌈 Being open to conversations that once may have seemed too “difficult” or “intimidating” to have
- 🌈 Thanking a team member for a very specific behavior that you now notice and may have overlooked before.

Becoming more familiar with differences that are unfamiliar is a positive and powerful way to reduce unconscious bias and create positive associations in the brain. This primes the brain to see someone’s difference in a more positive light, and makes it easier for the brain to extend care, compassion and kindness across differences. It increases understanding of others and recognition of shared interests, needs and outcomes.²⁷

IN CONCLUSION

Addressing implicit bias is far more than standardizing processes in organizations. Addressing implicit bias requires a desire to make individual behavior change...to improve the outcome. Addressing implicit bias can create a positive shift in the workplace culture. While being open to feedback or facilitating conversations around biases is a difficult undertaking, it creates a collective self-awareness in the workplace that is vital to effectively shift collective cultural practices. While questioning one’s own behavior or acknowledging potential unintended consequences to actions is challenging and can cause discomfort - that is the core of culture change.²⁸ This is vital to unlearning implicit biases and will help create a sustainable shift in the workplace, affecting efficiency and increasing potentiality long-term. Exploring intentional re-programming and implementing small shifts in individual behavior can bring long-term organizational change and new opportunities to the workplace.

FOOTNOTES

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23. *ibid*, pg. 83
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FOR MORE INFORMATION

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SpectraDIVERSITY

Open Minds ~ Transform Organizations

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Making the Unconscious – Conscious






How can you make something that is invisible, something that can be seen? How can you bring an unconscious bias out of the darkness and into the light? This worksheet may help. Use it to track your situations, reactions and outcomes for one week. Consider when you may be acting from old habits and are not getting a positive outcome. When you increase awareness of your auto-pilot moments, you can take more control of when your biases are steering your interactions – and adapt your response and change the outcome. You may even recruit the help of a “coach” (trusted colleague or family member) to help you process situations and discuss possible responses which could change the outcome. Just like training for a race or eating healthy to lose weight, when you build new “muscle” memories, it helps to have others engaged in the process. Others can hold you accountable, or provide helpful tips and ideas for improvement.

May this be the beginning of self-discovery journey for you that helps you continue to develop skills of inclusion.

Day/Date	Location/Scene (home, work, social situation, etc.)	Trigger (what caused me to “react” with a “lower brain state”)	Physical Reaction (heart rate, breathing, body temperature, muscle tension etc.)	Response (withdrew, used harsh tone, etc.)	Outcome (what was the result based on your response?)	Adaptation (what am I willing to try in the future to get a different outcome?)
Example	Work – weekly staff meeting with my manager and 6 peers	Sarah at meeting and once again contributed nothing. Everyone else always solving her problems and she doesn’t even thank us for it.	Hot face, heartburn, sour stomach, headache immediately after the meeting	I was angry again. Vented to Hani. Asked her to be my coach so I can get off this vicious cycle.	Wasted time talking about Sarah again. It’s the only way I know how to vent.	Hani suggested I ask Sarah for her ideas during the meeting. Help draw her out. I will do a simple focused task right after the meeting.
Day One						
Day Two						
Day Three						

Day/Date	Location/Scene (home, work, social situation, etc.)	Trigger (what caused me to “react” with a “lower brain state”)	Physical Reaction (heart rate, breathing, body temperature, muscle tension etc.)	Response (withdrew, used harsh tone, etc.)	Outcome (what was the result based on your response?)	Adaptation (what am I willing to try in the future to get a different outcome?)
Day Five						
Day Six						
Day Seven						

When in the moment, remember this process:

-  Pause. Take three slow deep breaths – focusing on relaxing your muscles.
-  Talk yourself through the moment: Is this a threatening moment? Is the person aware of his/her behavior that is a trigger for me? Why is this behavior a trigger for me? There are multiple interpretations for every behavior, what are some alternatives that I may not be considering? Do I usually respond this way when interacting with this person, if so, why?
-  Stop and take a moment to do a simple focused task.
-  Engage your short-term memory and recall a positive situation. Again, this will help the brain get out of the deeper “recording” causing the stress reaction and get to the “higher brain state” where you can consciously choose your response.
-  Reflect. When the stress has passed, remember to use this worksheet and process to intentionally reflect on where that feeling came from and how to address it more proactively in the future. This will help you re-write the internal recording and choose a new response path.