
DETAILS

Date:	August 16-29, 2023	Conference:	Counteracting Unconscious
Time:	Flexible		Bias
PX:	Joel Swaan	Location:	Virtual, Cornell University

SUMMARY

I respectfully acknowledge that Cornell University in Ithaca, NY is located on the traditional homelands of the Gayogohó:nq? (the Cayuga Nation). The Gayogohó:nq? are members of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, an alliance of six sovereign nations with a historic and contemporary presence on Ithaca lands. I also acknowledge the painful history of Gayogohó:nq? dispossession, and honour the ongoing connection of the Gayogohó:nq? people, past and present, to the lands and waters there.

This course is the first of four courses of the programming towards a certificate in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. I was interested in attending meaningful governance professional development before our strategic planning session in November. I'm hoping that there will be practical teachings in each course – this space is where I will summarize my main takeaways, try to capture the highlights of what stood out to me, and hopefully pass on something useful to others. These notes were compiled with assistance of the course transcripts, so there is an overlap between my phraseology and that of the course content.

The focus of “Counteracting Unconscious Bias” taught by Dr. Lisa H. Nishii, Ph.D. is on identifying “the perceptual and psychological processes that impact the way that individuals interact with people who are demographically dissimilar from them.” We also examined “the psychological processes that impact decision making within organizations” and identified “how professionals can design better work practices and help to more effectively leverage the potential among employees.”

The areas of bias the course focused on were gender, race, ethnicity, religion, national origin, religion, disability status, age, and sexual orientation. While acknowledging deeper level characteristics like people's personality and their values, we focused on surface level demographic differences as they represent groups of people that are culturally and socially distinct, with the assumption that people will have different life experiences depending on which of these groups they belong to; historically there will be differences in status and access to opportunities and privilege. The definition of privilege provided was a quote by Dr. Peggy McIntosh, Ph.D. from “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (1989), describing it as “an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks.” (**Addendum Tool: Check Your Privilege**)

Unconscious bias impacts how we see and interact with people. Having unconscious biases does not mean you're a bad person; we all have unconscious biases because of the way our brain is structured. It is estimated that we're exposed to as many as 11 million pieces of information at any time, but our brains can only consciously process about 40 bits of that information. Our brains help us survive by automatically filtering information that seems familiar. Our brain uses preexisting knowledge structures, or short cuts, that are related to who or what is likeable, that we can feel safe around, or what is valuable, right, or competent. These shortcuts mean that we don't have to keep figuring these things out every time we interact with a person, thing, or event. The problem is that our brains are so efficient at interpreting incoming information, and it happens so quickly that it happens below our level of conscious awareness – we believe that what we are seeing is objective, but we rarely realize that what we see is being impacted by the way our brains have interpreted incoming information using these shortcuts. Acknowledging the existence of unconscious bias is at the beginning of recognizing that even the best diversity practices can be undermined if those biases go unchecked.

Unconscious biases form through early socialization and everyday exposure to cues in our environment: parents, teachers, media, and advertising are all sources of this information, and many categories of bias are formed when children are young. When we initially see someone, we unconsciously categorize them. Once someone is put into a category, then all the traits, characteristics, and attributes we have as a part of that category get assigned to that person – potentially even overriding objective facts about them. Information that confirms our expectations get noticed, and our brains tend to discount information that dis-confirms our expectations. These confirmation biases can become self-fulfilling prophecies about the person. If you perceive someone with positive intent, you will let your guard down and let yourself be psychologically safe with them. If you assume someone is less competent in the workplace, you will not assign them meaningful or valuable work, which means they won't really have a chance to prove themselves.

Unconscious biases can influence the ways we behave and interact with others, including the subtle ways in which we may treat members of one group versus members of another group – these can lead to microaggressions. The two main types we discussed were that women and members of other kinds of lower status groups are more likely to be interrupted when talking, and that those groups are less likely to get credit for their ideas. These can have implications in terms of who is perceived to have competence – who has leadership potential, and who does not. *Microaffirmations* are the antidote to microaggressions. Small, brief acts that affirm the competence and value of others serve to acknowledge people and counteract some of the negative consequences of microaggressions. Examples include nodding your head in response to what someone is saying, backing someone up publicly when they offer an opinion or suggestion, or giving your complete attention to someone when they are speaking. **(Addendum Tool: Identifying Unconscious Bias)**

Role congruence, or role incongruence is also a part of unconscious bias – the types of characteristics that are assumed to be necessary to be a leader don't overlap with the attributes that are often associated with women and members of other groups. As a result, notions of success and competence are scrutinized a lot more carefully for these groups, and in a way that sets the bar higher in order to dispel doubts about whether the person is actually fit for a particular role.

Another example of how unconscious biased can impact people's outcomes at work is that they are associated with how members of a group ought to behave. The norms for how people should behave

influence how others react to those behaviours. There are two sides to this: some behaviours are seen as beneficial for members of one group while being seen as detrimental to another (men are perceived as more competent when they speak up assertively more than their peers, but women tend to be punished for the same behaviour), and success is associated more with being liked for men, whereas for women, success is associated with not being liked. So, women who engage in the same leadership behaviours as men tend to elicit a strong negative reaction in other people – often disliked, seen as cold, pushy, or aggressive, when the same behaviours don't elicit the same kind of negative reaction if a man were to do them. Men end up getting more of the benefit of the doubt. In addition, women who engage in helping behaviours, helping coworkers, volunteering, receive no extra points for doing so because it's expected of them, but are viewed negatively if they say no. On the other hand, men tend to gain points by engaging in those same activities and are not penalized if they don't.

On the topic of representation or numerical demographical targets, it is described as a “double-edged sword”. One needs to hire enough members of historically marginalized groups that the negative outcomes associated with being a ‘token’ start to decline and the unconscious biases associated with these groups starts to weaken. This can lead to real change in people's assumptions about the types of people who fit various roles and jobs. As well, if people believe that someone was hired or promoted into a position because of some aspect of their social identity, then they also assume that the person must not have gotten the job due to their competence – this can also become a self-fulfilling prophecy if people then expect less of them due to an assumption that they were hired due to a demographic characteristic instead of skill. These hires may then be provided with fewer opportunities to excel, and those employees start to internalize these negative perceptions of competence which impacts their level of engagement and performance. So, the very people who are meant to benefit from the focus on increasing representation can end up being the people who are harmed by it. It needs to be managed very carefully. **(Addendum Tool: Assess Existing Practices)**

Leaders are empowered to be aware of how their everyday behaviours can impact unconscious bias. First, they can offer the floor whenever possible to women and members of other historically marginalized groups so that people get used to hearing from women and equity-seeking/deserving people and get used to seeing them contributing in meaningful ways. A second thing leaders can do is to acknowledge the accomplishments of women and other minorities to help invalidate doubts that other people might make about their competence. Another thing leaders can do is push back when people say that a woman or equity-seeking/deserving person isn't ready or isn't qualified enough for a particular position. Historically, people are more willing to take risks on men, based on their potential, so what leaders should do is to focus on reasons to include somebody rather than reasons to exclude them so as to balance out the “gut instinct” people have about excluding people based on their competence. Lastly, be very mindful of the attributions that are being made for the success and failure of employees – make sure that success is attributed fairly and to ability just as much for women and members of minority groups as it is for men.

It's important to be specific about what constitutes excellent performance, and that those criteria are set out in advance to eliminate bias. Decision-makers need to be held accountable for evaluations, and they will be more careful. Recognize that in an effort to avoid negative reactions due to norms about how they ought to be, women are less likely to advocate for themselves; don't interpret this as a lack of confidence about their ability. Rather, it is a good practice to give them explicit permission to

advocate for themselves. When making performance evaluations or hiring decisions, be aware of the “likeability penalty” – evaluate behaviours as though they were performed by another gender or group to see if they are being favoured simply because of the attributes of the person. Audit who is doing the office housework – the communal service-oriented and support work which is really important for making an office function well. Make sure that those who are doing this additional work are receiving some form of additional rewards/credit for the investments they are making.

Other bias interrupters include having a “no interruptions” rule while anyone is pitching an idea. Practice “bystander interventions” where you stop an interrupter in their tracks by asking to let the first speaker finish. Think proactively about microaffirmations as opposed to microaggressions: nod your head, listen carefully, show support while someone else is talking, look interested. Give credit where credit is due – be aware of stolen ideas and look for opportunities to acknowledge the individuals who first proposed a particular idea. If you think an idea is good, back it up; help bring attention to the idea and get accustomed to hearing good contributing ideas from women and minorities. Practice the improv theatre rule where you are open to what the other person is saying and respond to keep the conversation going by saying “yes and” (and not “yes but”). “Yes and” frames that you’re building on what they have said instead of talking over somebody. **(Addendum Tools: Choose Interventions for Interrupting Unconscious Bias and Counteracting Unconscious Bias Action Plan)**

As noted throughout, I have attached copies of the tools we used to do the work, for your reference and possible use including the Course Project. This work was definitely interesting to ponder – I appreciated the mix of self-reflection and instruction. By submitting this report, I have had a chance to review the information again, and to focus on the learnings and on proposed actions to change. It is not my intent that this report be cumbersome, so I apologize for the length.

Respectfully submitted,

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Provincial Executive