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5 COMMON UNCONSCIOUS BIAS FAUX-PAS

There are two types of people in the world: those who walk around with unconscious biases, and those who lie about it.

Our biases—that is, our preconceived notions about others—impact how we perceive people, whether we listen to them and our propensity to know, like and trust them. And all these factors mean our unconscious biases have a major impact on our ability to receive information and then make sound decisions.

I recently had my own unconscious bias experience—and as bias goes, this story is an absolute classic. And while I find it personally distressing, I’ll share it now because I want to drive home the point that unconscious bias persists, no matter how hard we train ourselves to stand guard against it.

Here’s what happened. A woman gave me a piece of advice. I mulled it over. A man gave me the same advice. This time, the advice hit me like a thunderbolt, and I did the thing he recommended with alacrity and enthusiasm.

I didn’t even realize what I had done until a few days later. My husband commented on how certain and confident the man sounded. I agreed. And then the second thunderbolt hit me: I equated the sound of his male voice with certainty and confidence...so I took his advice more seriously.

Listening when a man says something, but not when a woman says the same thing, is a time-honoured unconscious bias tradition. Most professional women will attest to having been on the receiving end of this “old faithful” multiple times in their careers.

As someone who has devoted her career to the advancement of women, you can imagine the consternation this story causes me. But I share it with you for two reasons. First, to illustrate a point: when it comes to unconscious bias, no one is immune. Second, I shine a light on my own unconscious bias because I want to convey that the worst reaction we can have is shame and secrecy. The best thing we can do when we encounter bias is to recognize it and shine a light on it in a way that allows the perpetrator to maintain his or her dignity. In so doing, we offer others (and by extension, ourselves) —the chance to recognize our biases and correct them, rather than cover them up and bury them out of fear of the repercussions.

To aid with your recognition of biases, here are four more gaffes that I can practically guarantee you and I have made in our careers. Read, review and stand on guard.

The tall and attractive bias. We’re conditioned to think that tall, good looking people are competent and talented. Show me any collection of business leader awards and I’ll show you a gathering of disproportionately vertically and aesthetically gifted people.

The affinity bias. We have a tendency to think positively of people with whom we share a common experience. And we’ll go to great lengths to externally cultivate our affinities (X rings, anyone?).

Conformity bias. This is the type of bias your parents warned you about when they asked you if Frankie jumped off a cliff would you do it too? Turns out, maybe. We’re wired to cave to peer pressure and be swayed by popular opinion.

New mothers can’t focus bias. This bias asserts that if a woman has young children, then she doesn’t want to travel or work late, so why bother involving her in these types of career making assignments?

Have you been on the delivering end of these biases? More than likely. Remember—we all have biases. The trick is to recognize them, acknowledge them, and resolve to correct them.

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FEEDBACK

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