

Unconscious bias — its impact on the coach and the organisation

Angela Keane

“When you say ‘we’, who do you mean?” (Garton-Ash 2005, p.1) On first meeting someone, we may instinctively make certain snap judgements about them. And while it is our differences that characterise and individualise us generally, they can also be used as a filter for quickly categorising who belongs to ‘us’ or to ‘them’. Crucially, we are so hardwired to spot and react to difference that we do so without really being aware of doing so or how it informs our initial perceptions of each other. These are our unconscious biases at work. As I ponder the question above, I would like to invite you, the reader, to do likewise, in the service of our ongoing development as coach-mentors.

Awareness of unconscious bias is important for coach-mentors

As individual coaches we are constantly meeting and starting new relationships with coachees. We know how important those first impressions are to building a warm, trusting rapport crucial to the success of the coaching engagement. However, research shows that those first moments of meeting a new person are particularly prone to influence from our unconscious biases. In coaching, we quite quickly plunge into what can sometimes be personal and sensitive conversations, and all the while there is a risk that our and the coachees’ unconscious biases are in full unhindered flow because we are not aware of them.

‘Micro-aggressions’, a negative term suggesting hostile or derogatory behavior to a marginalized group, serves to alert us to those minute behavioural cues we all give to someone else, perhaps about whether or not you want to talk to them or whether their contribution has been valued. These may be completely unconsciously driven, and yet they strongly influence our behaviour.

What difference would it make, do

you think, to conduct those same conversations with a more heightened awareness of your biases? I believe it is an important development step for us all to better understand them.

Unconscious bias in organisations

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the organisations in and with which we work take-on and show the effects of our biases. Research shows that diversity in teams leads to increased innovation and better decision-making. It’s not just because, for example, the member of a ‘minority’ contributes something unique, but that everyone does. Turns out, we feel freer to express something different when we are all different, but when we are all the same, we over emphasise the things that we have in common. This gives us a strong incentive to favour diversity in teams and organisations. However, it appears that we are still inclined, through our biases, to keep diversity at a minimum.

So, what is unconscious bias?

As the name suggests, these biases occur outside our conscious awareness — we are literally unaware of them and therefore insensitive to their influence and effect on us or on others. Crucially, being unaware does not lessen their impact but rather increases the risk of negative consequences. This poses its own unique challenges: if we are unaware, how can we do something

about it?

One definition of a bias is “prejudice in favour of or against one thing, person, or group compared with another, usually in a way considered to be unfair” (Oxford Dictionaries on-line). To understand how these prejudices have come about in our development, we need to go back in time to when we were hunter-gatherers a hundred thousand years ago. In order to survive — to enable us to eat and avoid being eaten — we had to develop rapid and reliable ways of detecting who and what was a friend or a threat. We became very accomplished at making these decisions and evolved to take mental short-cuts in recognising the presence or absence of danger. Our brains evolved to be highly proficient at

taking these short-cuts; another aspect of survival in fact, because it would use too much valuable energy if we had to work out each decision from scratch each time. Hence, there is real energy and life-saving merit in being able to jump to conclusions based on experience and memory.

You could say that we make hundreds of biased decisions every day. Consider



We make hundreds of biased decisions every day

Unconscious bias — its impact on the coach and the organisation (cont.)

the tens of millions of individual bits of information we are faced with daily: everything we hear, see, read, feel, whether consciously or not. However, it seems we only have the capacity to process about 40. The rest is handled by our unconscious.

Different types of bias

Cognitive scientists have named several biases that frequently occur in all of us. For example, apparently the first two things we generally notice when we meet someone new is their gender and their skin colour. This is an instinctive bias, also known as cognitive bias, stemming from human evolution and strongly linked to survival. As mentioned already, we are hardwired to immediately spot difference in order to decide in an instance whether or not we are in any danger. However, there is more here than just this mechanism of fast pattern recognition, specifically of difference. It is also strongly infused with learned bias. Learned bias refers to the assumptions and biases that we absorb imperceptibly throughout our lives from society, education, family, friends and so on. I believe it is important for us, as coaches, to develop our awareness of both our instinctive and learned biases, as our behaviour, the tone and topic of our conversation, and even the quality of our listening, can be compromised by them.

Then there is confirmation bias. This leads us to discount or disregard information that disagrees with our assumptions, even if there are well-proven facts to the contrary and in spite of any risks associated with doing so. You may well have come across such irrational

thinking in some of your coaching sessions. Cognitive behavioural therapy has proved to be an effective method in confronting confirmation bias, but it is not easy. It takes time and commitment to overturn.

Another bias of relevance to coaching is expedience bias. It tends to become active in situations where some concentrated effort is required of us. Rather than applying the effort needed — continuing to listen attentively and taking the time to explore and analyse information with the coachee — we tend to revert to familiar solutions. This means that we have probably drawn conclusions without fully exploring the details of a situation, stopped listening without fully understanding, and jumped to a quick and familiar solution. This is a common problem often encountered in coaching, and not just by novice coaches. It becomes a question of whether to rely on our experience and accumulated wisdom, or to take a more logical and analytical approach.

Substitution bias plays out when we are asked a question to which we do not know the answer. Quite unconsciously we will substitute it with another question to which we do know the answer based on our prior experience. Has this ever happened in your coaching?

How does neuroscience explain unconscious bias?

With neuroscience providing us with new understanding of the physical changes and reactions within our brains on an almost daily basis, let's see what it can tell us about unconscious bias.

The amygdala lies deep within the centre of the limbic emotional brain. It's about the size and shape of an almond, but despite this small size, it plays an important role in relation to our survival needs. These include sex and emotional reactions like anger or fear. The purpose it serves is that it alerts us to potential danger. But in so doing, it means there is less mental resource available for reasoning and impulse control. If the threat is great, the prefrontal cortex will actually shut down which results in even less ability to process complex issues; we become less creative and less collaborative.

The brain classifies almost every new person as a friend or foe based on the degree to which they seem like us

When we perceive people as being different from us, it is likely that our amygdala is playing a part. Our capacity to understand and empathise with 'out-group members' can be impaired as we tend to misread social cues and

hoard information. "We generally tend to feel less empathy with out-group members", according to David Rock. He cites as an illustration that we may even experience pleasurable sensations in our brain when someone on the opposing team of a sporting event we're watching gets injured.

Given this instinctive capacity we have to react negatively in the face of difference, it would seem advisable for coaches to take steps to be on the watch-out for behavior stemming from this, both in ourselves and our coachees. It stands to reason that a strong reflective habit will go some way towards helping us here.

So what can we do to overcome and lessen the impact of unconscious bias?

Here are some steps to take, according to advice from Google, who are one of the companies leading the way in training their staff to be aware of unconscious bias.

1. Hold yourself accountable.

▲ The research is clear: we can make the unconscious conscious if we give ourselves a moment! Try to avoid running with the first decision that comes to mind.

▲ Question your first impressions.

▲ Justify your decisions: even if there is no pressure on you to do so, explain your reasoning anyway. If you are held accountable for your point of view, you will be less biased!

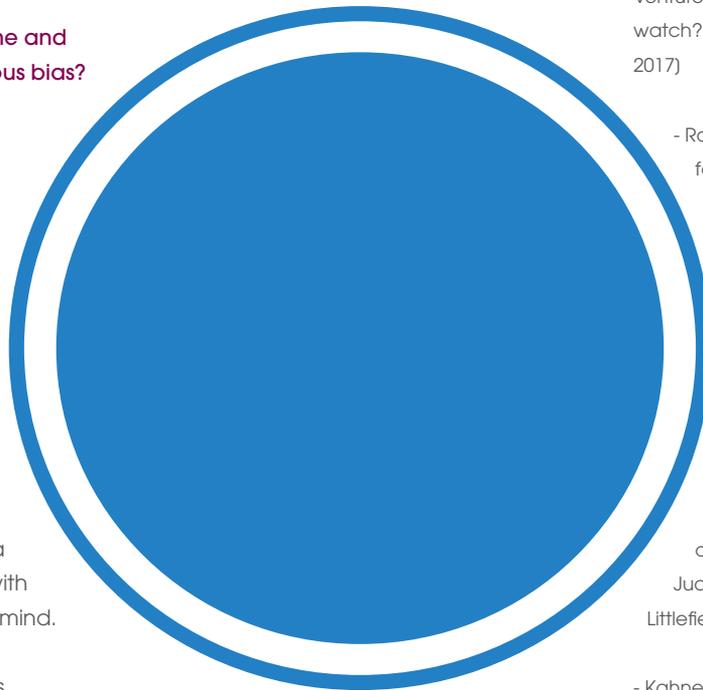
▲ Even simply writing down why you are making a decision can lead to less bias.

2. Create a culture where everyone is held accountable.

▲ Put structures and criteria in place that ensure decision makers are held accountable from the perspective of bias influence. This empowers everyone to watch out for bias, and this is critical to the success of policies to lessen it.

3. Ask for feedback.

▲ We're accustomed to doing this in coaching: "Can I just repeat what I heard you say?" But ensure you give others the opportunity to repeat what they've heard you say too. This gives them the chance to spot any bias in what you've said.



Already there are many organisations spending millions each year on diversity programmes and sensitivity training in order to support employees of all levels to watch out for bias in their work. It goes without saying that this is particularly pertinent within hiring and promotion. It takes particular focus, however, to ensure that this training actually transmits into a change in behaviour and less bias. If tackling unconscious bias is just seen as another compliance and regulation issue, then it is unlikely to have a real impact. It is necessary to hold individuals, managers and leaders accountable for their decisions, and for them to hold themselves accountable in the first instance, so that we develop the habit of

scrutinising our decisions for bias.

References and Bibliography

Garton-Ash, T. (2005), *Free World: Why a Crisis of the West Reveals the Opportunity of Our Time*, (Penguin, London).

- Unconscious Bias @ Work | Google Ventures - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nLjFHTgEVU> (Accessed: 4 March 2017)

- Rock, D. "Your Brain at Work: Strategies for Overcoming Distraction, Regaining Focus, and Working Smarter All Day Long" (HarperBusiness, 2009).

- "Don't be biased against Bias" - Huffington Post

- <http://www.strategy-business.com/article/00345>

- Ross, H.J. "Everyday Bias - Identifying and Navigating Unconscious Judgments in Our Daily Lives" (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014)

- Kahneman, D. "Thinking, Fast and Slow" (Penguin, 2011)

Angela Keane, Head of Cultural Coaching

Contact: anglele.keane@theoem.co.uk