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The unconscious bias

By Mohsin Nishat

(Please note that I am not a cognitive scientist but a management professional, so whatever I have written here is from my experience or study and not from any formal education on this subject.)

You are an ethics and compliance officer, and one of your key roles is to handle reported incidents by investigating said incidents, then suggesting remedial measures to take corrective and preventive actions.

You enter the office one day, open your emails, and receive a case related to sexual harassment. When you read the case details, a thought comes to your mind: The alleged individual in this case cannot do this as he is almost at retirement age and is seen as a practicing religious person in the office. This affects how you conduct the rest of the investigation, gather evidence, and ultimately reach a conclusion.

You also received a complaint related to the forging of sales data involving your employees and an employee of the sales agent (not your employee, but a vendor employee). You start your investigations with the notion that your employees might have been urged to do this by the vendor employee. This thought changes the investigation's tone and direction at the very first instance.

What is common in both the examples above?

Have you ever wondered why individuals behave the way they do? What causes individuals to make certain decisions while refraining from making others? A short and simple answer to this is their bias. Their biases lead them to make decisions in a certain manner and behave in a specific way.

What is a bias?

Per the *Cambridge Dictionary*, bias is “the action of supporting or opposing a particular person or thing in an unfair way, because of allowing personal opinions to influence your judgment,” while the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary defines it as “an inclination of temperament or outlook especially: a personal and sometimes unreasoned judgment.” And according to an article by Matthew D. Lieberman, David Rock, and Christine L. Cox in *NeuroLeadership Journal*, cognitive biases are “the unconscious drivers that influence our judgment and decision-making.”^[1]

Biases help us get through our day-to-day work without being overwhelmed by the information clutter around us. Biases are cognitive adaptations, helping us make quick decisions and judgments. They are unconsciously everywhere with us: whether we go for an entertaining activity over the weekend with kids, spend time shopping, or enter a meeting at work, they enable us to make judgments and decisions with minimal brain effort.

But bias can also be disadvantageous, as it has a potential for prejudice. Our brain is constantly taking mental shortcuts using these biases. The automatic way of making a decision is constantly using these biases.

How do you develop a bias?

Biases are developed through personal experiences and events, mainly at an early age, which become hardwired in our brains. These biases are mostly attached to the emotions connected with these experiences, problems, images, norms, culture, and sometimes tastes, making our brains adapt or behave in a certain way. Because of these biases, we categorize information in our brains; whenever we experience the same type of event, our brains quickly give us the message building up from our past experiences. For example, when investigating specific geography, you come across a particular ethnicity, and your previous experience with them was not very good. The next time you meet or interact with individuals of that nationality, you will be very conscious and critical because of your stereotyping of that ethnicity.

Biases are not always obvious. There are mainly two forms of biases:

- **Explicit or conscious:** This is a type of bias that you are aware of. The bias is happening consciously, knowing you are being biased and acting with intent. Prejudice is a type of explicit bias.
- **Implicit or unconscious:** Unconscious biases are beliefs and attitudes that operate outside of a person's awareness and control.

Out of these two biases, unconscious bias is the most challenging to handle. We will investigate this bias for the rest of the article and see how you can deal with it.

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