

How to make sure we measure others right

Dear Nadim,

I am an HR business partner working in retail banking for a leading UK bank. I have recently been sent on secondment to the private wealth management division of my bank to help train managers in understanding diversity and unconscious bias in recruitment. They have a reputation in the bank for resistance to change and for not meeting our diversity targets.

Getting them to consider the issues is an uphill task. I have been developing HR strategies to support different parts of the business for five years and am the first point of contact for most HR-related issues that managers and department heads have, but despite all my experience I cannot see how to get this particular group to engage with bias problems.

In meetings, they make snide comments about the value of diversity training, which they see as less than zero. It seems that even getting them to consider that it might have value to them will mean overcoming ingrained prejudices. How do I get the message across that diversity training is necessary for all managers who have hiring responsibility? They react as though they are being told that they do not know what they are doing and that their time is being wasted with politically correct nonsense.

I could force them to take part in training, but a tick-box exercise would be counter-productive. I think it might even entrench their sense of “that’s the way we have always done things around here and it works”. I want them to engage with thinking about how to overcome unconscious bias when hiring, not only so that the company can do better, but also so that they can pass on their learning about the subject to their peers.

Any ideas? Patricia, London

Nadim says:

Hi Patricia,

Thank you for your email. Diversity initiatives are now very much embedded across most organisations in financial services and there is good reason for that. Companies that have a more diverse workforce not only better reflect their customer base but they also perform more efficiently. However, unconscious bias is hard to tackle.

All of us use short cuts in making decisions based on what we expect. If we did not, we would not be able to respond as well as we do to the vast amount of information we deal with each day. But many of our responses are, necessarily, automatic, which leaves a lot of scope for unconscious bias.



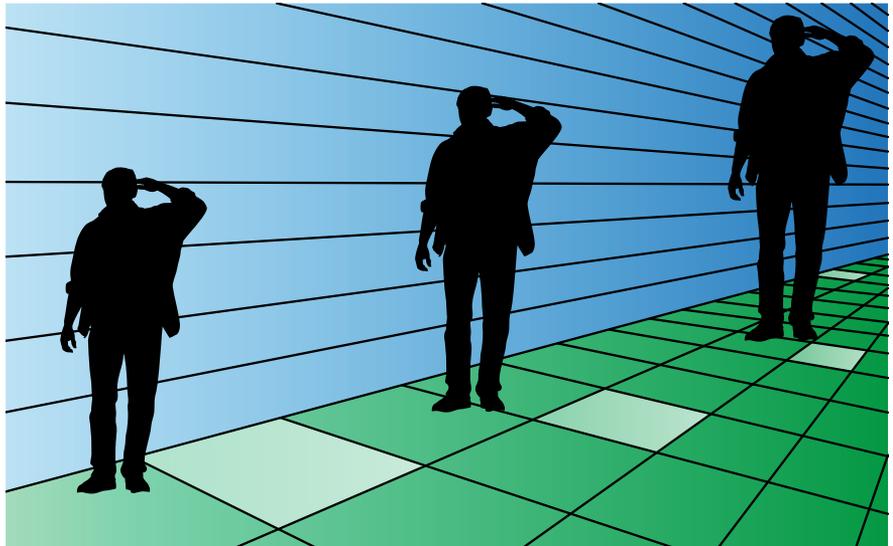
The roar of the home crowd makes the referees tip the balance in favour of the local team

What is unconscious bias? It is probably best to look at an example. In 2011, two researchers, Tobias J. Moskowitz and L. Jon Wertheim, tried to examine whether sports referees showed bias. In theory, referees are there to call it like it is. In practice, Moskowitz and Wertheim found that they consistently favour the home side – by a small amount and without knowing it. When it comes to deciding on extra time, for example, most referees award a little more time when a home side is lagging behind and a little less when it is ahead. But the referees were confident that they were even-handed. After all, they were experienced professionals doing a job and had seen hundreds of games.

Why did the referees rig things, however subtly and despite their own avowed intentions, in favour of the home side? The researchers argued that the referees were, unconsciously, trying to avoid annoying their home group, and so the danger of being excluded. The roar of the home crowd makes them tip the balance in favour of the local team.

Wanting to belong is important to all of us. Our individual family and societal backgrounds and cultural experiences affect the decisions and judgments we make. Think, for

example, about the answer to this: "After a long flight, you go into a bar where you bump into the pilot of your plane, who is wearing a dress. What do you say?" Many of us might assume that an embarrassed silence will ensue because the pilot must be a man. Or take a look at the picture on the next page. Which is the tallest figure? Try again, using a ruler...



It is such cognitive "short cuts" that make it vital for those hiring staff to understand fully the impact that unconscious bias can play in the recruitment process. But because the bias that makes referees certain they are even-handed in games, or so many of us assume a pilot must be a man, is unconscious, it can be particularly hard to tackle.

Nobody likes to be told that they are unfair or prejudiced, but there are many experiments that show gender and ethnicity biases among recruiters, especially during the CV screening stage. For example, male candidates are often rated higher than female ones even when the CV is practically the same.

But even at later stages in the recruitment process, bias can be present. One of the most famous examples is in the world of music. Until auditions were made "blind" – with the musician playing behind a screen – orchestras were almost exclusively male. Depressingly, women auditioning behind screens also had to remove their shoes so that the click of high heels would not give them away.

What to do? Here are some things you can do to get your managers to engage with the training.

1. Explain to your managers that everyone has some form of unconscious bias and that this is normal and nothing to be ashamed of. This is an important starting point as some people are sensitive about this issue. Examples from other walks of life will help.
2. If you have not been trained in dealing with unconscious bias, it may be wise to hire an experienced facilitator to lead the sessions for you. Look for people who are well versed in the issues of diversity and inclusion. You need someone who can easily answer difficult, and perhaps dismissive, questions, and who can also deal with cynical participants in a respectful manner.

3. Make the case for dealing with unconscious bias by using facts and examples, case studies and unconscious bias tests to get everyone on the same page. If the managers can see this is a genuine issue that they will gain from thinking about, they should learn much more quickly.
4. Provide immediate and actionable strategies that managers can implement, define the next steps and arrange further training if needed.
5. Make sure that the training is non-judgmental. Everyone should be able to air their views without feeling uncomfortable. This topic can be a sore point for some people. If nothing else, it carries implicit criticism of previous hiring practice. Set some rules for all participants to adhere to that focus on respect and compassion.
6. Offer ongoing coaching and support to managers who wish to continue the discussion.

While this is not an exhaustive list, the outlined steps can help people become more open-minded and thoughtful about a topic that is important to get right for our financial services industry.

Hope this helps. Nadim. ■



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