

# Reducing unconscious bias: a highly effective toolbox and how to avoid the unconscious bias pitfalls



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A growing number of companies are focusing on diversity and gender parity for their workforce and leadership teams. Yet many of them, despite their efforts, fail at generating long-term, sustainable impact.

One of our clients, a leading global industrial group, succeeded in increasing the company's proportion of female senior executives from 12% to 18% and the proportion of local talents in their executive committees from 15% to 36% in 24 months.

This company systematically identified and addressed structural barriers to diversity; reviewed mobility procedures and job organization; and screened a wide variety of factors with the potential to reduce career prospects across a diverse population. The company was also among the first large organizations to implement a plan to systematically reduce unconscious bias. A few years later, the company can point to demonstrable and sustainable change: the group's senior teams are significantly more diverse.

What follows are the main building blocks of such an unconscious bias reduction plan.

## Surface and quantify biases with face-to-face interviews and quantitative data.

Our unconscious biases lie in our unconscious minds. They are context-specific. Each organization generates and carries its own biases. They cannot be uncovered with mere introspection. At Diverseo, we start the bias-identification process by conducting interviews. Our questions to identify the unconscious attributes people associate with some social groups are as neutral as possible. We generally obtain a long list of potential biases. We then use two techniques to uncover them:

**A. ADVANCED QUANTITATIVE ANALYTICS** – also called Big Data. We download client HR data from multiple sources and systematically identify differences in career development across different social groups within the company. Whenever possible, we also measure the return on investment of past HR initiatives. For example, quite often, our analysis produces evidence that, while most people believe women cease working in order to have children, in reality women enjoy promotions less frequently than do men and they (women) tend to give up work as a result. Such information generally induces managers to take action. Data is also helpful to measure the impact of diversity interventions. For example, one of our clients extended the duration of maternity leave at full pay in an effort to reduce turnover among young mothers. As it turned out, young mothers, in fact, had initially the lowest turnover rate of all employee segments at the company, and the extended maternity leave actually increased turnover among women.

**B. IMPLICIT ASSOCIATION TESTS (IATS)** – standard and customized Implicit Association Tests. We often develop customized IATs to quantify the bias prevailing in the organization. Such quantification is highly useful. We have noticed that organizations generally tend to focus on the areas where their biases are lowest and miss altogether those that should be addressed as a priority. For example, one of our clients, a “Big Four” accounting firm, intended to invest massively to change the perception of women as leaders while in fact the organization’s main bias related to women and family. Similarly, one of the 10 largest banks intended to start a major LGBT program. While they were LGBT neutral, they had actually very strong unconscious biases about women working in both quantitative and client-related capacities. In both of these examples, our clients refocused their investments and their efforts.

Once biases have been identified, they can effectively be reduced. This requires intervening both at the individual and organizational levels.

## Offset biases at the individual level.

### A. Unlearn your unconscious biases.

Research on the malleability of bias has made very significant progress over the last 2-3 years and has produced evidence that some individual bias-reduction techniques are effective. Such techniques, which should be used on a regular basis and particularly before making a decision, include the following:

Taking an Implicit Association Test, prioritizing whenever you can those identified in your professional context. Some examples of such tests can be found at [www.diverseo.com/test](http://www.diverseo.com/test)

Identifying and thinking about a role model or a counter-stereotypical individual before making a key decision.

### B. Use reasoning techniques that allow more objectiveness no matter what decision is to be made.

Conscious deductive techniques can foster fact-based reasoning and reduce inferences at the individual level. One example of such a technique is to:

#### **Create a decision-making context fostering objectiveness.**

1. Concentrate to be able to focus on the decision at hand.
2. Engage as much as possible in a deliberative process to obtain different points of view while ensuring that cognitive load during the discussion is as low as possible. That is, do not overload decision-makers with too much information.

#### **Use individual fact-based deductive techniques.**

1. *List decision-making criteria* - Write down the criteria needed to arrive at a decision and make sure all decision-makers have the same understanding of this criteria. Be as descriptive as possible.
2. *Weight the criteria* depending on job content and context.
3. *Be inclusive* - Consider all potential candidates, especially when the decision involves hiring or promoting.
4. *List the facts* - For each candidate, identify key facts supporting the assessment of their competencies or performance against each criterion. Do not hesitate to use multiple sources for information whenever possible. Data analysis among large organizations has demonstrated that 360-degree feedbacks typically allow generating more objective and better-calibrated assessments.
5. *Rate the facts* - Rate or assess key facts against each criterion. Do not hesitate to momentarily mask the names of the individuals assessed to reduce potential bias linked to the gender, age, origin of the candidate.

6. *Do the math* - Multiply the rating by the weight of the criteria to make a more accurate assessment of each individual.

## Offset biases at the corporate level.

### A. Create decision-making processes fostering objective decision-making.

Beyond the individual techniques we have just seen, organizations can develop process structures and contents that best foster objective decision-making. We cannot stop the automatic workings of our minds. Such automatic workings most often have more influence on the outcomes of our decisions than we believe. Our analysis of client contexts, confirmed by research in cognition, have evidenced the following best practices which often require organizations to reshape their decision-making processes:

#### Make it simple.

- a. Simplify as much as possible the information used in the process. Quite often large organizations have created numerous and heavy criteria grids. Decision-makers get lost. When getting lost, they unconsciously pick the information that best corresponds to their unconscious biases or assumptions. Such processes therefore amplify individual decision-makers' biases instead of reducing them. One best practice is to have a maximum of six criteria to assess. We have found that best-in-class organizations often have five criteria. A few more can sometimes be added but this requires integrating advanced knowledge of cognition.
- b. Ensure that access to information is easy by reducing as much as possible administrative tasks to administer the process.

#### Have the right decision-makers.

- a. Involve the right individuals. Many organizations tend to involve senior executives with a limited knowledge of the individuals to assess or tend to leave key decisions to people who are too far down to step back and adequately calibrate decisions. Make sure you find the right balance for your organization.
- b. Involve the right number of individuals. Best practice is to have at least two individuals involved. In some decisions, effective calibration is achieved with three to four people.

#### Have the right facts.

The overall structure of the decision-making process should provide decision-makers with key facts to support their decisions. Quite often, some people possess relevant information that is not communicated to other key decision-makers. In such instances, people then "make up" for the missing information and use biased assumptions to make decisions.

#### Be descriptive and practical.

Make sure everyone has the same interpretation of key facts. Quite often, people tend to interpret criteria for decisions differently based on their own unconscious preferences or cultural context. One frequent example is leadership, which is perceived differently for men and women but also across different cultures. For example, at one of our clients, the Americans had the image of a tall, powerful, assertive, and charismatic leader, while for the Chinese the concept itself was not as relevant as they were searching for harmony and collective thinking. Standing out of the group was perceived by the Chinese as inappropriate. When people have different understanding of criteria they tend to interpret the performance of different people through their own lens. They end up recruiting, providing a better performance or potential rating or promoting the individuals they prefer by further tweaking the criteria for their decision.



## **Reduce mental inferences.**

Develop supporting documents and tools that help decision-makers to find the most relevant information and reduce mental inferences:

- a. Make sure the first information people see is the most relevant for objective decision-making. Very often, the first information decision-makers capture anchors or reinforces biases. These can include previous performance ratings and, in some countries, age, photos or other personal characteristics that might unduly influence performance perception.
- b. Make it easy to read. In some sophisticated organizations decision-makers are provided with so many documents and required to wade through so much information they end up unconsciously picking what they prefer.
- c. Make it easy to access. IT systems often do not help as decision-makers need to spend significant time to operate the system itself instead of mentally processing the right information. The cognitive focus is more on how to operate the software than on how to assess the performance.

## **Reduce the impact of self-stereotyping in self-evaluations when self-evaluations are involved.**

- a. Focus self-evaluations on key facts. Make sure that employees have clear, fact-based objectives against which to assess themselves. Such objectives can be business objectives such as sales or costs targets or behavioral objectives. For the most qualitative objectives, make sure these are based on descriptive expectations.
- b. Encourage people to know more about themselves and to know how they might unconsciously limit themselves. Research and tools on self-identity or self-image is making significant progress. Take advantage of it!

## **B. Generate large-scale mindset shift.**

### **Create a bias-free culture by systematically managing positive small cues.**

Unconscious bias results from our culture and the environment in which we live. Every day, we portray and see women in stereotyped roles. In advertising, women often make the laundry, cook and serve men and children at the family table. Their appearance in professional roles in ads is often quite limited and reserved to men. Stereotyped roles therefore shape our unconscious perceptions of women. Similar cues repeatedly prevail in corporate environments and shape our long-term perceptions.

One of our clients was very motivated to make progress on the gender front. The CEO decided to appoint a woman on the executive committee as head of communications. At the global senior management convention, she appeared on stage many times to introduce and hand over the microphone to her male colleagues. She never had the opportunity to convey a serious business-oriented message as did her male colleagues present in the room. Such a set-up certainly reinforced unconscious associations, such as women=helpers and men=leaders. The objective of supporting progress on the gender front was missed.

#### **To address these highly powerful “small cues”, organizations should therefore:**

- a. conduct a systematic review of all the small cues and subtle messages prevailing in the environment. Complement this review with the results of Implicit Association Tests when such tests are available.
- b. make sure to eliminate as much as possible all the small cues reinforcing the core biases prevailing in the organization. Develop new cues to change perceptions gradually.
- c. train and involve communications teams and more generally key executives to make this process sustainable over time.

## **Provide large-scale unconscious bias training to enable employees to unlearn their biases.**

Most effective organizations provide unconscious-bias training directly targeting both the biases themselves and the impact of such biases at the conscious level. Best-in-class training content generally includes (i) *awareness-building tools for unconscious biases such as Implicit Association Tests with professional debriefing of such tests*; (ii) *interventions to instigate responsibility to change such as the communication of corporate-wide gender objectives*; (iii) *techniques to make more objective talent-related decisions*; and (iv) *strategies to offset day-to-day impact of biases. Providing real-life day-to-day examples of biases and their impact needs to be done carefully.* Some research shows that such examples might also activate the bias and therefore reinforce biases instead of reducing them.

No matter how effective the training, the impact of such training does not last and needs to be sustained over time. Several techniques can be used. Touching base with training participants to encourage them and repeating some simple effective exercises can be effective. Such methods can encourage them to naturally counteract the impact of their biases and to practice techniques to boost objectiveness in decision-making and day-to-day tasks. To ensure such techniques are used in a systematic and structured manner, Diverseo's team has developed the first online brain-training program to allow participants to offset their biases over an eight-week period.

## **Avoid the unconscious bias pitfalls.**

Our mind operates very much like a computer with two processors. We have a rational, or explicit, processor we control, which Daniel Kahneman, recipient of the 2002 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences, called System 2. And we have an automatic, or unconscious, processor that operates beyond our awareness, which Mr. Kahneman called System 1. This processor has much more impact on our decisions than we all believed a few years ago. Even when faced with rational data, our unconscious mind will lead us to unconsciously pick the information that will confirm our unconscious preferences. The recent progress in brain research now allows us to develop new tools to reduce the impact of our System 1 processor when such impact is unwanted. Here are a few key principles to keep in mind when seeking to reduce the impact of unconscious bias:

### **A. Act directly on the unconscious mind for more impact.**

Consciously, we are able to reduce only partially the impact of unconscious bias, and we are unable to act on the bias itself. To begin reducing unconscious biases we must act on the unconscious mind. Our unconscious biases are automatic and result from the automatic workings of the mind. Conscious efforts at reducing implicit bias activate our conscious mind, while unconscious or implicit bias lies in our unconscious mind. Therefore, using our conscious mind (introspection) just does not enable us to access biases. Moreover, conscious efforts to reduce unconscious bias entail the use of cognitive resources, which results in what researchers term "cognitive overload". You become unable to control the automatic activation of unconscious biases and your biases actually have a much stronger impact. Compiling a list of standard biases and systematically checking for their presence serves only to address the issues in part and may even reinforce the biases:

I. Experience with our clients demonstrates that biases can be surprisingly numerous and diverse. A standard list cannot enable us to determine all the biases prevailing in an organization. We can, however, identify prevailing biases that make the most impact on the organization by leveraging advanced data analytics. For example, at one of our clients, people generally believed there was a strong bias in favor of MBA recipients from several specific universities. Analysis proved that such a bias, in fact, was not present. Proof of attendance at one of the universities in question actually had no bearing on performance assessment or career development. In fact, in this particular organization, a much different and unexpected bias had a statistical impact on performance assessment: namely, people's tendency to associate unconsciously the taking of vacations with a low level of engagement and of performance.

II. Most people do not possess the ability to identify biases at the conscious level. Introspection does not help, as we have already noted. Analytics, when conducted internally by the very subjects whose biases are targeted, have limited impact. Biases are usually so ingrained that “insiders” just do not “recognize” the right data to uncover the bias.

## B. Encourage decision-makers to be open-minded and curious. Be careful when asking for objectiveness.

Some people believe they have successfully reduced their unconscious biases merely because they consciously attempted to do so before taking a decision. In fact, they often tend to make more biased decisions. They then tend to tweak supporting fact in a very subtle way.

Furthermore, research on accountability in decision-making has yielded evidence that those who have been primed to be more objective will, in fact, be less objective as a result. For example, when a person has been primed before meeting a candidate, the unconscious workings of the person’s mind will capture unconscious attributes of the candidate during the first few milliseconds of their interaction. When primed to be objective, decision-makers will unconsciously retain an even tighter grasp on those initial attributes. They will then invest significant cognitive resources to gather information to support their initial, unconscious assessment of the candidate. Few resources will be left to enable the person to discover more about the candidate.

The best approach, therefore, is to encourage people to take responsibility for being fair, and to uncover their biases with cognitive tools; to foster decision-makers’ curiosity and openness; and to encourage them to candidly discover more about the individual they are assessing.



The latest advances in brain research along with the enhanced analytical power provided by Big Data now allow us to know how to unlearn highly engrained biases. Both individuals and organizations have a unique opportunity to make a difference. The techniques can be highly sophisticated and complex but also very simple and accessible to all. At Diverseo, we believe that the 21st century could see a tremendous shift in our ability to include and empower women, people with disabilities, elder employees, people from all nationalities... We intend to be part of this systemic shift and contribute to the best of our abilities. It will be better for our communities, for our businesses, and for each one of us, because we are all diverse.



Diverseo is the preeminent cognitive bias advisor, providing diversity consulting and training services. The company’s unique approach integrates the latest advances in cognitive science, Big Data and technology to help organizations enhance the quality of decision-making and to shift mindsets. Diverseo’s clients have obtained significant results in better integrating diverse markets and talents.



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# Focus on Gender and Leadership Implicit Associations



## Does it take a gender to be a leader?

To better understand why most organizations struggle to move the gender equality numbers while devoting a lot of resources, we conducted a global study on perceptions of gender and leadership, measuring attitudes toward women and leadership both on the explicit (i.e., conscious) and the implicit (i.e., unconscious) level.

Opening the door to the implicit level, we designed a specific Implicit Association Test to measure how female and male managers associate leadership with well-known female leaders (such as Julia Gillard, Cristina Kirchner, Chanda Kochhar, Christine Lagarde, Irene Rosenfeld, Dilma Rouseff, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Zhang Xin) and unknown men.

This study, which is still ongoing, was conducted in partnership with the Women's Forum For the Economy & Society and kicked off in 2012



Irene  
Rosenfeld



Zhang  
Xin



Dilma  
Rouseff



Christine  
Lagarde



Julia  
Gillard



Ellen  
Johnson



Kristina  
Kirchner



Chanda  
Kochhar



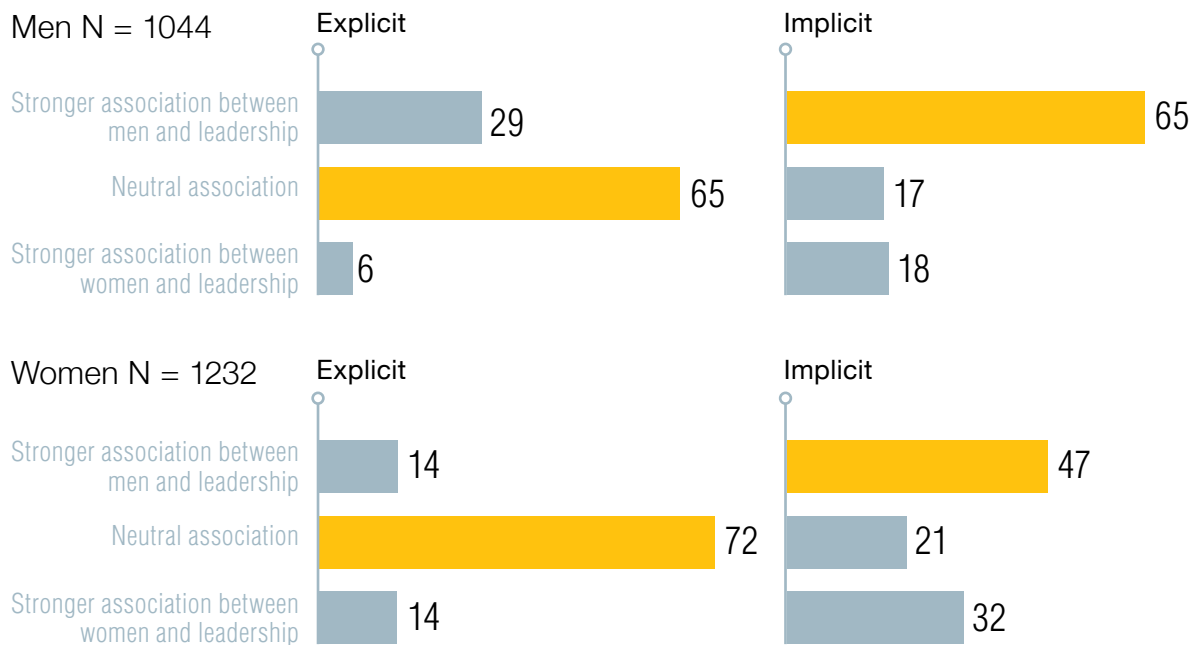
Unknown men randomly from a stock image website

While most people explicitly believe men and women are equally effective leaders, they tend to associate leadership more strongly with unknown men than with recognized female leaders.

At the explicit or conscious level, most respondents believe men and women are equally good leaders; most of them believe that when push comes to shove, they themselves make objective career-related decisions about women.

And yet, at the implicit level, the picture could not be more different: the same respondents tend to associate leadership much more strongly with unknown men than with world-famous and recognized female leaders. It is as if the brain was on autopilot.

At the explicit level, people believe men and women are equally effective leaders.  
 At the implicit level, men and women associate men with leadership (even more for male respondents)  
*Explicit versus implicit answers in the male and female population (%)*



Interestingly, recent results show that younger respondents have a stronger implicit association between men and leadership than older respondents. This belies a classic argument in this field: that “time will solve the issue” as “younger men are more open” and “stronger female leaders are in their formative years”. Our research therefore suggests that, in fact, action is needed.

The research also looked at whether there are differences from country to country. Actually, there are. In some countries, the association is a bit stronger than others. Brazil, for example, is an outlier. Brazilian respondents make a particular association of women with leadership roles, probably because of their historically diverse population and culture and of the strong representation of female national leaders.

This study helps explain why even some of the best diversity initiatives have very limited impact: they often focus on women's leadership skills with various actions such as leadership seminars for women. Such initiatives can sometimes be useful. But they often reinforce the prevailing automatic association of the terms women and subordinate by manifesting the notion that women need additional training to become effective leaders. They also usually completely fail to address the male leaders' automatic or unconscious perceptions of women.

## Why does this matter?

This matters because research shows that the unconscious drives our behaviors. When making a decision about a promotion to a leadership role, implicit associations will lead the majority of business executives to appoint a man instead of a woman, even when the woman is actually a more effective leader. This also matters because it results in women "checking out": several studies show that women tend to adapt to environments where they are most often not expected to play a leadership role. They also adapt their behaviors to general expectations and also to prevailing stereotypes. While many people are convinced women have inherently different leadership styles, the latest longitudinal research shows that women adapt their leadership style to their job requirements. Women are often encouraged to take jobs where so-called "female values" are required for success, therefore fulfilling (and reinforcing) the prevailing stereotype.

However, when women take roles that require an assertive, so-called "masculine" style, they adapt their leadership style and act as expected and required to succeed on the job, just as men do.

Moreover, while men and women tend to have a stronger association of the terms men and leadership, men tend to have an even stronger association of men and leadership at the implicit level than women do.

## Today, the field of mind sciences provides an opportunity to effectively change mindsets and truly leverage gender diversity.

Integrating business consulting and mind sciences provides us with an effective way forward. It puts a massively significant and untapped performance lever within reach.

You can access the study at  
[www.diverseio.com/what-we-do/diverseio-unconscious-sealing-women-in-leadership/](http://www.diverseio.com/what-we-do/diverseio-unconscious-sealing-women-in-leadership/)



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