THE C–SUITE'S GUIDE TO UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

TO BUILD TRUST AND UNLOCK BUSINESS POTENTIAL, EXECUTIVES NEED TO ADDRESS FIVE TYPES OF BLIND SPOTS.

by design NOT DEFAULT

TURNING VALUES INTO VALUE · BY DESIGN NOT BY DEFAULT ·

OPENING

We're going to start by addressing what is always the herd of many elephants in the room. Generally, racism, misogyny and the terms DEI/JEDI.

We will not be addressing racism and misogyny directly here, because many of these bias' are parts of or contribute directly to them both. Here, we want to break down the bias' that contribute to racism and misogyny so that you can help your company to mitigate poor outcomes because of these bias'.

Let's be clear that there will always be people whom hold the bias's that contribute to, cause and exacerbate racism and misogyny....our goals is to help you build a company and brand that is built to filter out and fight against these bias' becoming a part of the company communications and culture.

Curing hearts and minds is not something we can do in a piece of content but we can help you build systems with resilience that mitigate bias beyond your tenure.

So let's dive in.

INTRODUCTION

Everyone carries attitudes, stereotypes and beliefs that unconsciously affect perception, beliefs and actions. Businesses, which are ultimately nothing more than the people who operate them, are no exception. The problem for executives is that unconscious biases can negatively impact every dimension of the business: everything from hiring and firing to brand-building and marketing strategies to organizational culture. By quietly shaping decision-making, these biases are costly across business functions.

The big picture is simple: Unconscious biases stymie trust inside and outside organizations, constraining the possibility of strong relationships because of how the people and product experiences show up. They can undermine credibility, alienating current and potential customer groups. Biases can cause employees to lose faith in leadership. And they can warp strategic thinking and decision-making.

The good news is that while everyone has them, they are not immutable and they can be mitigated by systems and processes. The necessary first step is self-awareness and for a company, cultural awareness. So let's stop talking about bias' in the abstract and dive into the different types.

Here's an overview of the five predominant types of unconscious bias—personality, visible characteristics, cultural, organizational and behavioral—and how executives can address them.

PERSONALITY UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

This type of bias results from your own personality. Maybe you're so extroverted that you pity someone spending a quiet night at home. Or you value data and rationality and don't understand how anyone can rely on instinct or their own experience to form judgments. Personality bias stems from the natural inclination to favor those whose communication and decision-making styles mirror our own. One theory, the Process Communication Model (PCM), describes six personality types: Promoter, Thinker, Rebel, Harmonizer, Persister and Imaginer.

Business risk examples

Subpar decision-making due to homogenous teams that tend to mirror the leader's thinking style and blind spots. On the talent management front, performance evaluations that favor individuals with the same communication and interpersonal style as managers.

How to address it:

CHROs could train managers to be aware of the value of different PCM personality types. To better support product designs from a range of customer perspectives, COOs could create cross-functional working groups bringing together diverse personalities.

VISIBLE CHARACTERISTICS BIAS

This is probably the most widely understood type of unconscious bias. Biases based on visible characteristics include those centered on race, gender, ethnicity, age, body type, gender identity and expression, and physical / mental ability. These biases are often internalized from a young age based on societal norms and expectations.

Business risk examples

Marketing campaigns and brand voices based on outmoded and simplistic customer "personas" that unintentionally reinforce stereotypes. Products and services that are inaccessible or irrelevant to certain groups or populations.

How to address it:

CMOs should move their teams beyond reductive personas ("working moms," "Gen Z consumers") in favor of more accurate ecosystemic understanding of customers and their needs. At Consciously, we recommend adopting a poly-identity lens that can capture the interdependent identities that shape behavior, motivation, resistance, and joy. Key questions CMOs should push teams to ask are:

What cultural, emotional, historical and structural experiences inform the choices of our current and potential customers. And what might we not be seeing or accounting for?

CULTURAL BIAS

Cultural bias is when you interpret something based on your own culture's standards or the standards of the majority group. Examples of cultural bias include ethnocentrism, which may involve unconscious judgments related to marital status, parental status, religion and socio-economic status. Another example is language: People are more likely to be biased against speakers who have accents different than their own.

Business risk examples

Organizational monoculture that fosters group think and stifles strategic acumen and innovation, limiting growth opportunities. If everyone in the C-suite shares the same culture, the trend can trickle down the org chart, affecting recruiting and hiring practices, and creating systemic blind spots for the business.

How to address it

The CEO has a central role to play here. He or she should lead by example, assembling a culturally diverse executive team that effectively decenters the dominant culture in terms of what leaders look and act like. CEOs can recognize and celebrate employees who are cross-culturally fluent, helping to give a clear green light to hiring managers recruiting diverse talent. Chief executives can also diversify leadership pipelines. It's about showing value and appreciate for the range of differences. Research has shown that companies that assemble executive teams with greater ethnic, parental, religious and gender diversity are more likely to have higher profit rates.

ORGANIZATIONAL BIAS

This bias links directly to internal structural norms—how power is distributed and wielded across the business, which departments and divisions are considered high-profile, which job functions are considered ripe for leadership development and/or highly skilled. Another example: short-termism, a bias toward prioritizing and rewarding short-term actions and results. All of these biases can become an ingrained part of the organization.

Business risk examples

If all incentives are geared toward short-term results, a business could erode its reputation or deplete the natural resources its business model depends on in pursuit of immediate financial gains.

How to address it:

A Chief Sustainability Officer (CSO) can work to ensure sustainability goals are more than just green boxes for the business to check or PR gambits. They should be seen as organization-wide commitments that prepare the business for long-term viability and success. To that end, the CSO should work to widen the organization's field of vision to include mid-term and long-term horizons.

BEHAVIORAL BIAS

BEHAVIORAL BIAS

Unconscious behavioral biases distort how we communicate (beware biased language), how we view ourselves as an individual (beware self-serving and negativity biases), and how much we try to control, among other behaviors. Control bias refers to people's tendency to overestimate how much they can influence events. Faced with failure minority group members, for example, tend to minimize discrimination and attribute their failure to themselves. They want to believe they have control over the outcome, when in fact the person doing the discriminating does.

Business risk examples

Sales or promotional campaigns are launched with great enthusiasm, despite no customer data backing up specific related interests or needs. Confirmation bias—when we pay more attention to information that supports our beliefs than information that contradicts them—can contribute to strong internal stakeholder support for a new product or service that has a weak business case.

How to address it:

Everyone in the C-suite can help combat behavioral biases. A CEO can reward an executive team member who thoughtfully dissented by challenging assumptions based on past business successes. A CMO can avoid stale marketing ideas by seeking honest feedback from different internal and external (creative agencies) review teams. Criticisms should be welcomed and valued to create positive feedback loops rather than echo chambers.

UNDERSTAND BIASES, BUILD TRUST–BASED RELATIONSHIPS

There's no clear finish line when it comes to becoming aware of and addressing unconscious biases. The process is not about achieving perfection or relieving guilt. It's about moving beyond old simplistic stories about who people are and how the world works, embracing complexity and enabling new possibilities.

By undermining trust, biases block meaningful relationships (both internal and with customers) from forming and strengthening. When businesses do the hard work of checking their biases and then move into action to minimize them, they're opening up space to deepen relationships and build trust—two essential ingredients of any successful business.

consciously