

OVERCOMING BIAS TRAPS

Pamela Fuller & Mark Murphy with Anne Chow

To be human is to have bias.

If you were to say, "I don't have bias," you'd be saying your brain isn't functioning properly!

Unconscious bias arises from our brain's capacity problem. We take in an astonishing 11 million pieces of information each second, but we can consciously process only about 40 of those bits. To handle the gap, our brains build shortcuts to make sense of this information.

For example, we pay special attention to data that proves our strategy is working, and gloss over data that casts doubt. That's confirmation bias. We unconsciously prefer the first job candidate we meet, which is primacy bias. And we simply like people who are like us, which is affinity bias.

These shortcuts can be a boon for time-strapped professionals; they let us make quick decisions without having to deliberate on every detail. They can also distort the facts, cause inaccurate judgments, and inhibit our professional performance and possibilities.

Bias is a preference for or against a thing, person, or group, compared with another. Biases may be held by an individual, a group, or an institution. We're sometimes conscious of these biases and can state them directly.

Here, the focus is on unconscious bias, also called implicit or cognitive bias. Research shows that we have unconscious biases around gender, race, job function, personality, age or generation, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender identity, family status, nationality, language ability, veteran status, culture, weight, height, physical ability, attractiveness, political affiliation, remote working, hair color—even the messiness of someone’s desk, or their posture.

Unconscious bias can have a positive or a benign affect. For example, a team leader might have a bias for collaborating or a preference for working with or without music.

But many biases have a significant negative impact. For example, research shows that workers with strong regional accents are paid 20 percent less than those with a mainstream accent. As a result, these unconscious biases can limit professional opportunities for ourselves and others, across the entire Talent Lifecycle.

The Talent Lifecycle is the process of your career and all of the decision points that occur in it, like getting hired, promoted, or selected for stretch opportunities. It also includes the benefits you receive.

The good news is that our brains are wired not just for biases and preferences but also for change and growth. It takes time and conscious effort to create new ways of thinking and habits. It’s not easy, but it can happen.

The Bias Progress Model moves beyond awareness of unconscious bias to encourage specific action. The model includes four parts: *Identify Bias, Cultivate Connection, Choose Courage, and Apply Across the Talent Lifecycle.*

Each component of this framework also involves a principle. The principle for Identify Bias is self-awareness. Self-awareness is the pursuit of introspection. Increased self-awareness can enable us to identify our biases. When we build self-awareness, we stop acting automatically and start making better decisions.

The first step in identifying bias is to know ourselves and examine how personal identity influences and is influenced by bias. In FranklinCovey's Identity Model, the sources that comprise our identities include information, education, context, culture, innate traits, and our experiences. These elements and our identity go two ways. The elements influence our identity, and our identity influences them back. Both of these influences create biases.

The good news is that our brains are wired not just for biases and preferences but also for change and growth.

A primary goal of exploring bias is to bring the unconscious to consciousness so that we can improve the quality of our decisions and relationships. Once we bring the unconscious forward and name it, we can also analyze it.

Dig into your identity. Complete 10 statements about who you are, representing traits such as age, race, gender, culture, and physical abilities but also education, religion or spirituality, skills, family relationships, personality, and defining experiences.

Think carefully about the identifiers that may fuel an unconscious bias toward others. Also think about the identifiers that you feel could or have made others biased toward you. There might be identifiers where both have occurred.

Consider the correlation between your identity and potential or uncovered biases. Do they limit possibilities or expand them? Are they serving you well or getting in the way of what you're trying to achieve? Do they influence you to put off decisions or lure you to rush into actions you often regret?

Another way to identify bias is to recognize the bias traps. The bias traps are circumstances in which we are more susceptible to lean into biased thinking. Understanding them ensures we can recognize and avoid them when necessary.

Three bias traps are *information overload*, *feelings over facts*, and *the need for speed*. These represent common circumstances when our brain is most susceptible to bias in the workplace.

When we face an overwhelming amount of data or inputs, we're at risk of *information overload*. For example, if we have hundreds of résumés to plow through, we might be more likely to lean into bias to help us make fast assessments. One type of information overload is confirmation bias, which occurs when we seek information that supports our beliefs. Another is anchoring bias, which occurs when we rely on the first piece of information we see to make decisions.

The second bias trap is *feelings over facts*. Many of us would say that our beliefs are factual, but of course our perceptions are not always accurate. For example, most people drastically underestimate the size of Africa, because how we feel about a continent's prominence in the world outweighs the facts.

Two common biases are in-group bias and negativity bias. In-group bias is our tendency to favor people we like or those who are like us, while excluding those who are different. Negativity bias is when we are more powerfully affected by negative experiences than positive ones.

Finally, *the need for speed* occurs when we cut corners to act quickly. It can result in snap judgments, bias, and misperceptions. For example, we need to fill a position immediately, so we hire a colleague's niece instead of doing a competitive hiring process.

The need for speed includes attribution bias, which happens when we judge others on their actions but judge ourselves on our intent. It also includes sunk-cost bias, which is our tendency to continue our current course of action because we've invested time, money, or energy into it.

Select a bias trap that you might be prone to fall into. Increase your self-awareness by listing how, where, when, and what triggers this bias trap for you. What are actions you can take to create space between what triggers your bias trap and how you react?

A primary goal of exploring bias is to bring the unconscious to consciousness so that we can improve the quality of our decisions and relationships.

The second step of the bias progress model is to cultivate connection. By building connection with others, we fill in the gaps in our supercomputer brains, leaving less room for assumptions and more room for human complexity and nuance.

You may have heard the expression “The fish is the last to discover water.” We can’t see our own biases when we’re surrounded by them. When we demonstrate empathy toward others, we’re suspending our own beliefs, agendas, and interests in an effort to understand those of others. We make space for real breakthroughs to occur.

One way to connect is to focus on belonging. Our brains are constantly trying to figure out whether we belong. Most researchers believe the need to belong is a critical psychological need. And yet in so many ways our workplace structures don’t cultivate belonging or promote connection.

Researchers R.F. Baumeister and M.R. Leary define belonging as, “the feeling of security and support when there is a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group or place. It’s also the fundamental drive to form and maintain lasting, positive, and significant relationships with others.”

Being your authentic self at work is the first step to belonging. It occurs when you are transparent and honest about your identity: who you are, what fuels you, and how you communicate. It means you let your colleagues in; they know your partner's name, your love of ski vacations, and your excitement about that new car.

And they know how you're feeling about the work you're doing and what ideas and projects you're most excited about. The opposite of authenticity is an environment where you have to apologize for your existence. Apologizing for your body, your identifiers, your background, or your personality is inherently limiting, if not damaging.

Indicators of belonging include language. Identity is as personal to us as our names. So just as you would call everyone by the name they choose, you should also use the identifiers that they ask you to use. If you're unsure what pronoun or identifier to use, follow the other person's lead. When in doubt, using their name will never fail you.

An organization's policies and procedures also have real and disparate effects on the people in the organization. To make your policies and procedures more inclusive, circulate drafts to team members of various identifiers and life circumstances, and ask for their feedback.

Finally, representation matters. If an organization is not diverse, can it truly be inclusive? A sense of belonging is key to our overall sense of wellness as human beings.

When people find themselves in the “only” category—when they don’t see themselves reflected in the organization, in its customers, or its leadership—this absence can impact how they define their possibilities.

Representation shows that an organization maintains at least the infrastructure of connection—and that includes seeing yourself reflected across the organization and across its clients in a meaningful way.

As you prepare for your next team meeting, find a few examples of language, policies and procedures, and representation in your team and organization that include or exclude elements of belonging.

Being your authentic self at work is the first step to belonging.



The third part of the bias progress model is to choose courage. When we bring unconscious biases to the surface, we find they're often not in alignment with our values. But we don't necessarily know what to do about that imbalance.

In the FranklinCovey framework, choosing courage helps us make progress on bias at all levels, especially in our teams and organizations.

Courage in this context is the mental or moral strength to strive and persevere in the face of uncertainty, fear, and difficulty. Courage is framed in four different ways to allow for the reality of circumstances.

First is courage to identify. A manager leads a successful engineering division working on complex projects for clients. One of his division's more capable engineers has been going through a gender transition to female over the last year. This engineer has been open about her transition, and the manager is respectful when the topic comes up.

But he realizes he hasn't been considering her for the more visible, client-facing projects in the past few months, even though she has successfully led similar projects in the past. It takes courage to identify when we might be making decisions based on bias.

Second is courage to cope. Worried about repercussions to his job, a team member doesn't display any photos of his husband in his office or even on the home screen of his phone. Some of his co-workers make homophobic jokes, and a few of the senior leaders laugh along with them. He tries to ignore it, but it's starting to get to him. And if he avoids those colleagues, it will affect his work. He notices a team member who also doesn't find the jokes funny and decides to confide in her over a coffee break one day. It takes courage to cope with being on the receiving end of bias.

Third is courage to be an ally. A group of high-ranking women in the Obama White House noticed they were being talked over and disregarded in important meetings. They decided to team up and amplify one another's voices. For example, when one contributed a good idea that was ignored in a meeting, another woman would bring the idea up again and point out whose idea it was. This practice came to be known as amplification and became a widespread strategy for allyship. It takes courage to be an ally.

Fourth is courage to be an advocate. In 2006, activist Tarana Burke began using the phrase "Me Too" to raise awareness of the pervasiveness of sexual abuse and assault. In October 2017, tens of thousands of people began sharing their stories of surviving these experiences. It created a movement across the globe to protect victims, educate people on appropriate behavior, and teach people what to do if they experience or witness problematic behavior. It takes courage to be an advocate.

Let's explore the courage to cope a bit more.

It is no small thing to be on the receiving end of bias. If you feel like your possibilities are being inhibited, research shows that those experiences are detrimental to your overall well-being and affect your ability to contribute personally and professionally. It takes courage to acknowledge how damaging it is to be on the receiving end of bias and to work through that negativity to re-center yourself.

If you experience bias, prioritize self-care. Make sure you're okay. Step away and effectively deal with any associated stress or emotional distress. Self-care can include removing yourself from a situation, meditation, physical activity, journaling, a conversation with a trusted friend, and self-reflection. Self-care can also mean setting appropriate boundaries with colleagues and leaders in discussing sensitive issues. You can also write about your experience. Recording our experiences in writing can help us understand ourselves and be its own form of self-care.

**It takes courage to acknowledge how
damaging it is to be on the receiving end
of bias.**

Organizations can support policies and workplace wellness programs that allow employees to step away and distance themselves from the situation. For example, a federal contracting firm has allocated what they call “focus rooms,” small conference rooms for individuals to use when they need time alone.

The fourth step in the bias progress model is to apply the principles of self-awareness, openness, and growth to the Talent Lifecycle. The decisions of the Talent Lifecycle fall under three categories: Getting Hired, Contributing and Engaging, and Moving Up. Let’s talk about getting hired.

Getting hired consists of the decisions that determine whether someone has a seat at the table: recruitment, interviewing, employee benefits, and hiring. It includes questions like how a position is advertised, what information is included in the job description, how interviews are conducted and by whom, what the interviewing process consists of, and how the final hiring decision is made. Compensation is also a part of getting hired.

One of the most common pushbacks around hiring is when leaders claim that their hands are tied because they don’t receive applications from many qualified diverse candidates. Partnerships are a relatively easy and accessible way to broaden your applicant pool without asking invasive questions during the hiring process.

Partnering with historically Black colleges and universities is a common best practice, but it's less commonly used to recruit people from other underrepresented groups.

You can reach out to academic institutions to market to their first-generation and veteran students, their LGBTQ+ organizations, or their office of disability services.

The baseline for good recruitment is being aware of the feelings stirred up as you interact with different candidates. If you encounter negative feelings, be sure to check them against possible biases. Here are some other strategies for mitigating negative bias in the hiring and selection process.

Move away from one-on-one interviews, and create trained hiring panels. Build a process whereby hiring officials are required to complete training on bias, effective interviewing, and determining competency and skill. Require that multiple hiring officials participate in and collaborate during interviews.

Also, while the résumé provides a factual baseline about a person's prior experience and education, other components can better highlight a person's talent, capabilities, and possibilities. For technical positions like coding, organizations often ask candidates to complete sample projects in addition to submitting a résumé. We can extend that practice to many nontechnical job functions as well.

Leadership cannot be effective without inclusion. This has always been the case, and it will continue to be true.

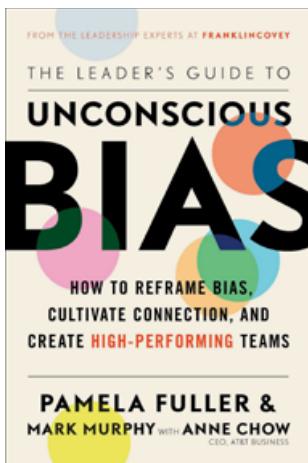
Now that you have uncovered some sparks of insight or resonance, think more about those. Build out the story of why this subject matters to you.

And with that point of connection, take action and implement positive change. ☺

Leadership cannot be effective without inclusion. This has always been the case, and it will continue to be true.



Info



Ready to dig deeper into this idea?
[Buy a copy of The Leader's Guide to Unconscious Bias.](#)

Want copies for your organization or for an event? We can help:
customerservice@porchlightbooks.com 800-236-7323

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Pamela Fuller is FranklinCovey's chief thought leader on inclusion and bias and one of the firm's top global sales leaders. She began her career in non-profit fundraising and advocacy. After earning her MBA, Pamela served as a diversity analyst at the US Department of Defense. Pamela currently lives in South Florida with her husband and children. **Mark Murphy** is a FranklinCovey Senior Consultant who has facilitated content successfully to clients worldwide for the last twenty-nine years. During that time, he also spent eleven years as a founding partner of a small boutique firm specializing in project management consulting. Mark grew up in Colorado and lives in Dallas, Texas. **Anne Chow** was named CEO of AT&T Business in September 2019, making her the first woman to hold that position, and the first woman of color CEO in AT&T history. She's responsible for 30,000+ employees who collectively serve 3 million business customers worldwide. She is also a proud board member of FranklinCovey.

SHARE THIS

Pass along a copy of this manifesto to others.

SUBSCRIBE

Sign up for e-news to learn when our latest manifestos are available.



Porchlight

Curated and edited by the people of Porchlight, ChangeThis is a vehicle for big ideas to spread. Keep up with the latest book releases and ideas at porchlightbooks.com.

This document was created on January 6, 2021 and is based on the best information available at that time.

The copyright of this work belongs to the author, who is solely responsible for the content. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License. To view a copy of this license, visit Creative Commons. Cover art from Adobe Stock.