

# How to find your own blind spots

Everyday biases play an innate and crucial role in our working lives



Clare Mulligan

Unconscious bias workshops are currently very popular as part of equality, diversity and inclusion programmes. Organisations are working towards raising awareness of how we as human beings make decisions, especially about other groups of people, and how we can build more inclusive workplaces.

Unconscious biases are implicit preferences we have about other people.

Throughout our lives, each one of us gathers millions of pieces of information, and categorise this information to help us make sense of the world and make quick decisions.

We use social identities to

categorise the information we gather, such as gender, race, culture or even profession, appearance, age, role, grade, education and hobbies. We then apply positive or negative associations to each category we create.

Some categories can be understood to some level, as we can access media, news, social influences that we are all subject to, such as gender bias on TV programmes.

However, most biases are not even aware to the individual as we each gather categories and perceived negative or positive associations from personal experiences and influences.

## All biases are created equal

We all have bias, and it is a normal part of how we as humans operate. However, we know there are common biases that human beings are subject to:

■ Affinity bias – we are more likely to apply positive attributions to someone we have an affinity with, so if we went to the same school as someone it can create a natural affinity. As we have an affinity,

we are more likely to see the positive traits in them as they are 'like us' and we are more likely to trust them

■ Confirmation bias – our brain will look for evidence to support what we already think is correct. So, if you think everyone from a certain group has a set of characteristics, you will look for evidence of this.

Your brain is satisfied when it has confirmed the existing thought process and will not be motivated to look for further information.

■ Primacy effect – first impression of a person tends to influence their future assessment

■ Halo effect – seeing one area of success in a person and thinking that they are successful on a wider scale. You will see their halo and that will affect your overall impression. Important to realise not everyone else will see the halo and therefore more likely to notice other behaviours that you can be blind too. The opposite of this is 'horns effect' where we see one negative trait and it influences our overall perception of the person.

■ Beauty bias – judging some-



one on their appearance.

■ Age bias – judging someone on their age and making assumptions about their values, behaviours or ability.

■ Gender bias – judging someone on their gender or showing preference to one gender or asking gender biased questions.

■ Generational bias – each generation will have been influenced by media, tv, world events and social experiences of their era. This creates a shared view of the world for each generation. By not realis-

ing other generations will have a different view causes a bias towards other generations.

Biases become obvious through showing preferences to one person such as recommending them for a promotion or hiring them. Biases can also play out in a subtler way through micro affirmations or small evidences of body language such as head tilts, smiles, listening etc.

We can see evidence of affinity bias in a team meeting, where some people are listened to more attentively.

The person not being actively listened to will feel this, and it can lead to demotivation or perceived unfair treatment. Consciously listening to each team member can be a big step in overcoming bias and working towards an inclusive culture.

## Recognising the blind spots

It is important to recognise that most biases don't come from a place of bad intent, and as we learn to reflect on our biases there is a need to be

kind to ourselves to allow us to recognise our biases and then reduce our biased behaviour moving forward. We have a 'bias blind spot' in that we are more likely to recognise biased behaviour in others. This is because we will notice behaviours or actions that are not in line with the way we think.

So, when working with your teams and colleagues, it is also important to show tolerance when highlighting any biased behaviour you perceive. Holding each other account-

able and calling out biased behaviour is essential in modern workplaces, and is effective if we use it as an opportunity to learn and develop.

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Organisations are becoming flatter and more decentralised – but that doesn't mean they don't need leaders

# Leadership as a collective

What's happening in leadership? One new trend is collective leadership where the focus is on the team



Fiona Buckley

Organisational redesigns are placing much more emphasis on the need for different leadership skills. These redesigns can involve flatter organisational structures, broader spans of control, decentralised authority, reduced layers of management, inter-generational workforces and remote and flexible working arrangements. New types of team-focused leaders are now required to support these new ways of working.

These teamwork-driven organisations cannot function with leaders who focus solely on their own organisational area, they need a collaborative leader with cross-functional thinking and knowledge. This whole concept of "collective leadership" is a newer form

of leadership that matches the requirements posed by new working environments, where challenges need to be tackled by groups not individuals.

Becoming more of a team player at senior level is key for career survival. This is ultimately where leadership is heading, and it's time for leaders to look beyond their own function and department and focus on their organisation holistically.

## Generational leadership transformation

There is a major generational transformation about to take place in the leadership sector with the arrival of millennials on the global leadership scene. While many millennials are currently in management roles, they largely feel there is a lack of career development surrounding the skills they need to succeed as leaders.

Millennials need proactive leadership development as part of their career and development plans. Acceleration of their professional develop-

ment is key as they represent our future leaders. Oversights now will hurt organisations later with insufficient succession planning.

Once millennials secure executive leadership positions this aforementioned collective leadership style will flourish. Millennials are high achievers by nature and technological innovation, many based on collaborative networks, is their natural world. All of this and more can be expected to impact their leadership styles.

## Continual skills development

Mercer's Global Talent Trends 2017 study showed that chief executives still perceive leadership skills as the number one skill gap, and are worried that leaders aren't ready to lead their organisations toward growth.

With job roles and required skills now constantly changing due to advances in, and the proliferation of, technology, it is incumbent on leaders to regularly upskill. This can often simply mean learning

about what their teams are using to drive the business forward, so the leader can manage them effectively.

Without this upskilling, leaders risk becoming seen as dinosaurs within their own organisation, and it can often be the difference between one person getting ahead and another person remaining stagnant in their career.

**Leadership as a skillset needs to become a key focus for leaders looking to progress and become better leaders**

## The rise of soft skills

Leadership skills transcend all roles, organisations and sectors, and are skills that are in large demand in work. Sadly, these types of skills are still too often referred to as "soft skills" when, in reality, they can be exceptionally hard skills to master. These soft skills are often given a backseat in place of more technical and/or financial skills.

However, leadership as a skillset needs to become a key focus for leaders looking to progress and become better leaders, and we need to move beyond this perception of viewing leadership through a soft skills lens.

There is an undeniable movement towards recognising, measuring and using these "soft skills" of a leader within an organisation. Leaders that don't develop this part of their toolkit, and instead accentuate what has made them successful in the past to compensate, will be left behind or simply overlooked.

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Staff of all ages benefit from a sense of purpose at work, and it's up to leaders to provide it

# Good leaders put value on communication and trust



Gareth Jones

It has become a common place of organisational life to claim that we are living in a highly volatile environment where change is constant and uncertainty is a permanent feature of life. It is certainly true that rates of scientific and technical change are extremely fast and accelerating – artificial intelligence, nano technology, genetics, stem cell research, blockchain – will all greatly affect the way we live our lives and the way we work.

However, I'm not entirely convinced of this argument about volatility. I was comparing my life with that of my mother. She lived through two world wars, a general strike, a civil war in Ireland, the Korean War and the Cold War. My life, in contrast, seems to have been characterised by almost unbroken quietude.

## Slow evolution

There is a more fundamental observation to be made about leadership in a changing world. While we can concede the speed and power of technology, just think how slow human evolution is. We are very like the people who walked the Earth ten thousand years ago. So let's focus on some leadership constants. First, leaders read con-

text. They collect soft information which gives them insights into the way their organisations are really functioning. They walk into the Cork office and can tell quickly that morale is a little low; they ask why things seem to be buzzing in the finance department.

This aspect of leadership can't be replaced by management information systems or the latest fad big data. The good news is that situation sensing is a skill which can be improved.

Try keeping a little diary of your observations of the workplace, nothing too demanding, just ten minutes at the end of the day. The very act of recording your observations will raise and sharpen your antennae.

Secondly, leaders were and will remain compelling communicators. Indeed, in a world of Twitter, Instagram and the rise of digital communication platforms, the imperative to be a compelling communicator is even greater. Otherwise your voice is lost in the noise.

A purposeful vision But what should leaders communicate? The most important is to paint a vision of the future, to give people coping with change some idea of where we are headed.

Closely related is that they provide a sense of purpose, they answer the question "what is this organisation really for?" Our recent research shows that the desire for a sense of purpose is increasing among the young but is

present across all ages.

Leaders also communicate values. The guiding principles which regulate and inform our behaviour at work. Recent scandals in both the private, public, charitable and sporting arenas have made the issue of values absolutely central. And leaders do more than communicate values – they live them. Leaders are exemplars of organisational culture.

Finally, it is still true that people want to be led by a real person who they can trust. A lot follows from being a real person – real people bleed, sometimes cry and have weaknesses.

Many executives don't take their real selves to work: rather, they role-play through the week in the hope that they can rediscover their humanity at the weekend.

They are destined to fail – and this helps to explain the epidemic of executive stress. Whether we like it or not, we will spend the bulk of our adult waking lives at work. It had better be a place where you can be yourself.

Yes, change is all around us, but for leaders there are also constants. The challenge is to be yourself, but skillfully and in context.

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