

# CAN WE COUNTERACT OUR BIASES?

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Here's a puzzle, known as the "father-son exercise". A father and son were involved in a car accident. The father was killed outright and the son seriously injured. The father's body was taken to a local morgue. The son was rushed to a nearby hospital and wheeled into the emergency operating theatre. A surgeon was called. Seeing the patient, the surgeon exclaimed: "Oh my God, it's my son!"

How could this be? Did you work out immediately that the surgeon was the boy's mother? If so, congratulations! More than 40% of people on training courses fail to spot the answer because of the unconscious association many of us make between "surgeon" and "male".

This rather tragic example, from a research study into diversity training, is cited in an interesting new book I've just read called *The Value of Difference*\*. It argues that we cannot tackle organisational barriers to women, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities until we accept that we are all biased, get to grips with our personal biases, and resolve to take action to counter them.

The author, Binna Kandola, is a business psychologist. He delves into a treasure trove of psychological research to explain why diversity policies, programmes and training have had so little effect in making organisational cultures more "inclusive". Basically, the good intentions in the policies are undermined by unconscious biases.

It's human nature to categorise people and to seek to belong to a group that is like us, he says. We all carry prejudices about those who aren't in our "group" - whether it's people of other nationalities or ethnic origins or social class, people who are obese, gay people, or people with disabilities.

Equal rights legislation has largely driven overt discrimination - such as blatant racism and sexism - underground. That doesn't mean it has disappeared. Kandola calls it "modern prejudice": discrimination that is covert and often unconscious, and therefore harder to confront.

Once when I was invited to give a presentation in the Netherlands, I was sent a form with details of the driver who would meet me at the airport. I was described on the form as "Mr Maitland". Not knowing my sex, the administrator had assumed I was a man. If it's a business meeting, it must be a man - just like the saying "think manager, think male".

I was more amused than offended - particularly as I was going to speak about women in the corporate world and it gave me a great way in. These days, most women would probably shrug it off rather than take offence. But this little incident shows how ingrained assumptions are about business being a "male" activity.

While unconscious bias can degrade anyone's behaviour, it's particularly harmful when it affects the decisions of the dominant group in a society or an organisation - for example, decisions about selecting people for promotion. Take the use of the term "grey hair" to denote experience, wisdom and gravitas. These are often seen as desirable qualities in a senior role. But, as Kandola says, "grey hair" is a defiantly male attribute. Women are encouraged to spend time and money avoiding grey hair. So the use of the term in relation to seniority unconsciously nurtures bias against women.

Those outside the dominant group often work hard to disprove the negative stereotypes – for example, that women aren't natural leaders – and feel under pressure to act against their instincts. Plenty of women have altered their natural communication styles (as well as their hair!) to make them more “acceptable” in male-dominated companies.

How can we counteract our biases and help leaders to counteract theirs? One important way is to get to know people outside our own group. Translating this into practice, it's important that we build bridges between influential male networks and networks of women. Reciprocal, or reverse, mentoring, which enables members of the dominant group to understand and empathise with the experiences of those outside it, is also useful for breaking down barriers.

Kandola says people find it easier to accept they have a bias *for* a particular group, than a bias *against* other groups. Our bias towards able-bodied people in the workplace is a good example. It's been entrenched by years of management theory and practice aimed at achieving fitness and efficiency – just think of the term “lean manufacturing”. How does that leave people who are less fit, lean, or able-bodied? Feeling pretty excluded, I imagine.

He says that a helpful and straightforward method for eliminating bias is something called an “implementation intention”. This is more concrete than “goal intention”. A goal intention might be “I won't be prejudiced”, whereas an implementation intention would be “If I see a dark face, I'll ignore skin colour”.

As he puts it, “our repertoire of unconscious behaviours can be brought under conscious control simply by training our attention”. We have to keep working at it. We also have to WANT to do it. But people don't always want to change their unconscious behaviour. This is where the business case is so important. Yet Kandola is rather anti-business case. He says we've become obsessed with it. He asks: why can't we argue for diversity in terms of fairness and social justice?

I'd argue that the business case is crucial to gain the attention of reluctant, sceptical or simply overburdened executives who see diversity as a soft issue and an optional extra. Fairness is a pretty subjective concept. If there's a powerful case for diversity improving business performance – and there is – that is a more powerful way to attract the attention of corporate leaders.

It's with leaders that all this has to start. They often say they want to see the business case for diversity. They should hold up a mirror. As Kandola rightly says, “leaders are the business case. If they change, others will too...”

The action that leaders take can be hugely powerful. At the 1995 Rugby World Cup final, South African president Nelson Mandela metaphorically moved the goalposts in terms of forgiveness and empathy by cheering for the national team – previously seen as a powerful symbol of white nationalism – and wearing a team jersey.

There are other, more mundane, ways of challenging bias, not least through positive media portrayals. When I showed my 16-year-old daughter the “father-son puzzle”, she couldn't understand why it was a puzzle. The surgeon was obviously the mother. I asked how she'd got it so quickly. She said she watches the US hospital drama *Grey's Anatomy*, which features lots of women surgeons!

\* **The Value of Difference: Eliminating bias in organisations**, Pearn Kandola Publishing, 2009, [www.pearnkandola.com](http://www.pearnkandola.com)