How to curb unconscious biases, stereotypes at work

Everyone holds bias. The trick is whether you are aware of your unconscious bias and whether you actively seek to rise above them to act with dignity and purpose. PHOTO | FILE | FOTOSEARCH

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In Summary

- In the modern world, Suzanne Price’s research shows that more than 150 different types of unconscious bias exist. Did you know that taller men are the most frequently promoted to leadership positions because of unconscious bias?
- Anthony Greenwald showed that a shocking 75 per cent of Caucasian American managers held unconscious bias against African Americans and actually acted on those biases.

Wachira works as a network support officer in an IT department for a leading education institution. He takes great pride in his work.

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Personally, like hundreds of thousands of other Kenyans, Wachira comes from a mixed ethnicity family. His father comes from the Kikuyu community and his mother the Maasai.

Growing up he felt cultural identity with both societies. In the workplace, many of his colleagues do not know about his Maasai heritage as it is not reflected in his name.

Inasmuch, Wachira sometimes overhears stereotypes casually thrown out by passersby about pastoralists or Maasai specifically.

He sometimes hears that people think that Maasai are less educated, yet Wachira himself holds advanced qualifications. When visiting Maasai areas, Wachira then on the flip side hears stereotypes about Kikuyus as overly industrious people.

Are stereotypes harmless or do they represent a deeper phenomenon? Aside from random comments overhead in a restaurant or on the street, stereotypes often represent deep seated views of other categories of people. Whether expressed verbally or not, all humans hold unconscious bias against people different from themselves.

Last week Business Talk in the Business Daily explored the effects and breadth of unconscious bias in cultures with special emphasis on the police brutality cases in the United States.

Today, let us delve into the nuances and how to overcome unconscious bias in our workplaces.
Ever watch the humorous American television sitcom Big Bang Theory? Notice the bias that the astrophysicist holds against the engineer? Sheldon holds low expectations of Howard who did not complete a PhD.

The bias affects Sheldon’s actions towards Howard throughout the series. Now imagine a real life situation where five employees, three men and two women, of equal rank work as administrators in an office.

What if when the cleaner fails to show up on a particular day and the male office manager requests the two women to assist in tidying up the office but not the men of the same rank? That male office manager would be showing clear unconscious or direct bias against women in the workforce.

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Unconscious bias encompasses shortcuts that the brain makes in order to make quicker decisions and not have to ponder too long. In a primitive world, unconscious bias could save lives by enabling quick decisions and actions: lion = bad, cow = good, human from the family = safe, human from another family = danger.

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Some of the most common unconscious biases centre around skin colour, ethnic background, age, weight, gender, personality, disability status, marital status, parental status, and affinity bias whereby we favour those with similar interests and hobbies.

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How do unconscious biases form? Most unconscious biases originate during childhood as kids react to what they hear and see around them. But adults can form or deconstruct their biases too.

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Unconscious bias against

John Marvel of George Mason University in the United States uncovered that even just hearing repeated
messages against a type of person or type of organisation can cause unconscious biases to form as an adult.

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Deborah Merritt and Barbara Reskin of Ohio State University found striking differences in the rate of hiring across American law schools.

Women faculty were consistently less likely to receive prestigious academic positions than men.

The results provide a shocking picture since the United States harbours strong antidiscrimination laws based on gender, yet still unconscious bias affects managerial decisions even when illegal.

Can we lose our biases? Researchers Erin Westgate, Rachel Riskind, and Brian Nosek tracked American attitudes towards the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender citizens between 2006 and 2013.

The team saw a 26 per cent decline in unconscious bias hostility towards the minority group. More exposure to those we hold biases against often lowers our brain’s visceral reaction to them, especially when they do not behave in the negative ways that we expect.

How can executives reduce unconscious bias in the workplace? The University of North Carolina delineates three different approaches when, utilised together, reduce the scourge in offices.

First, offer awareness training to all employees with special attention paid to managers. Training provides a safe place to discuss stereotypes and biases. Google an online “Implicit Association Test” for your employees to take and assess their own biases.

Next, do not be afraid to label the biases that employees hold or are likely to occur. David Rock of the NeuroLeadership Institute proclaims that labelling biases can help to eliminate those same unconscious biases as employees become acutely aware of them.

Then, articulate the negative effects that biases can cause towards unfairness and incorrect decisions.

Finally, an organisation can create structures that detail policies, procedures, employee surveys, and checklists for activities such as decision making, resume screening, interview formats, and meeting agendas. Creating structures provides formal ways to handle work tasks in appropriate ways.

In summary, do not fail to address unconscious bias in your homes, workplaces, and in your own minds. Discuss workplace biases with other Business Daily readers through #StopKenyaBiases on Twitter.

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