Managers in a firm should beware of biases that could affect key decisions on an employee.

PHOTO | FOTOSEARCH

Researchers continue to publish more cutting-edge studies in the world’s leading business psychology journals in 2017 that focus on human beings’ deep levels of unexpected unconscious bias against each other.

A fascinating and disturbing trend involves the levels to which humans utilise non-verbal cues in order to build our impressions about other people in the workplace. How one walks, sits, stands, raises or lowers their arms, or points with their hand all trigger intense feelings in other people that lead them to perceive positive or negative emotions about the other person.
Our brain’s powerful subconscious involves the more ancient sections of the mind that regulates impressions, gut feelings, and emotions. Whether we find someone else attractive, a threat, friendly, or enjoyable to be around all generate from subconscious quick decisions informed by how our brains evolved to survive in the bush.

If you walk down Moi Avenue in Nairobi and another person walks toward you in certain manners of steps and body posture, your brain would instantly recognise the threat and immediately jolt you to move away or retaliate with your own threat posturing.

You would not need to consciously even think about your immediate actions. Instead, your quick responses come naturally to you garnished from thousands of generations of evolution on what to do under similar situations in order to protect yourself.

In addition, researchers have known for more than a decade that humans also make snap judgements about each other’s personality, intelligence, and behavioural intentions based on facial appearance.

Facial appearance does not include hairstyle, makeup, clothing, or jewelry, but rather the bone structure and physical outlay of facial organs and skin composition. Essentially, facial appearance involves things that you cannot change without dangerous reconstructive surgery.

On May 11, Business Talk highlighted that humans unexpectedly build their perceptions of someone’s leadership ability based on mouth width just like other primate species. The wider someone’s mouth then the more we believe that they would be a strong leader even without any actual proof of their past leadership experience.

Researchers Margaret Ormiston, Elaine Wong, and Michael Haselhuhn in their 2017 just published study took investigations a step further by clearly linking the width-to-height ratios of our faces to what others think about us.

Facial width-to-height ratio entails the cheek width (essentially, the width between the two cheekbones) compared to upper facial height (which means the distance between upper lip and mid eyebrow).

The literature in recent years already uncovered the facial measure as determinant in various positive and negative perceptions about someone.

However, Ormiston’s team went deeper to find that that thankfully, width-to-height ratios do not affect how we view each other’s ability, competence, benevolence, or goodwill.

So humans subconsciously do not believe wide-faced individuals more or less intelligent or good-intentioned or a threat. However, the study did uncover a startling perception bias.

Humans strongly feel that people with wider faces hold lower integrity levels than those with narrower taller faces.
So, if the distance between your cheekbones is small compared to the length between your upper
lip and eyebrow, then congratulations! Those around you view you as more honest with higher levels of integrity.

Your spouse is more likely to trust what you say and your employer is less likely to ask you for evidence to prove your point.

Unfortunately, if you were born with a wider face, then real world implications mean that you stand more likely to experience lower likelihood of getting hired for a job, less chance of obtaining investor money into your firm, as well as a greater likelihood that a judge or magistrate will convict you of a crime compared to a narrow faced individual.

As a manager in a firm, it becomes crucial for you to understand the bias that persists in your subconscious and not make hiring, firing, promotion, or disciplinary decisions based on arbitrary gut feelings on someone’s integrity.