

Implicit Bias in the Workplace

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Slide deck and recording will be available on [InsideCIRES](#)

Goals of this session

Participants will learn how to:

- Describe the elements of an inclusive work environment.
- Distinguish between different types of implicit bias.
- Recognize how implicit bias shows up in hiring processes, recommendation letters, performance evaluation and team dynamics.
- Determine practices to interrupt implicit biases.

Icebreaker question:

Please submit three words that come to mind when you think about a scientist.

Icebreaker question:

learner white committed detailed
skeptical lab precise glasses inquisitive methodical interesting
integrity open intelligent academic collaborative ideas objective
factual laboratory oriented logical curious smart beakers vigorous
analytic education creative research analytical organized fair
motivated introvert thoughtful focused emotional detail
scattered careful intelligence precision measurements funny puzzled
minded working curiosity privilege
dedicated intravert

Icebreaker question:

What is the difference between an environment that is **welcoming** and an environment that is **inclusive**?

Inclusive vs. Welcoming environments

An organization can be welcoming but noninclusive.

A **welcoming culture** emphasizes politeness and friendliness, and how people present themselves to others.

An **inclusive culture**, on the other hand, is about intentionally creating an environment where any individual or identity group is respected, valued, and empowered, while ensuring different perspectives are sought, acknowledged, and considered.

Arthur Chan

Disrupting Norms

The status quo - how things have always been done - does not work for everyone. Many people do not thrive in our current model.

Questioning Assumptions

We all make assumptions about others. Often these assumptions are detrimental and prevent us from digging deeper.

Building Relationships

When we have trusted relationships at work, everyone feels more comfortable sharing their process, asking questions and discussing mistakes, which ultimately helps the team problem solving process.

Inclusive Work Environments

We want to help create inclusive work environments at CIRES where:

- any individual is respected, valued and empowered **and**
- different perspectives are sought, acknowledged and considered.

In order to start questioning our norms and assumptions, we have to start identifying our implicit biases about other people on our teams and in our organization.

Implicit bias

Bias: an inclination or prejudice for or against one person or group.

Implicit Bias: the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understandings, actions, and decisions in a subconscious manner. These biases are activated involuntarily and without an individual's awareness or intentional control.

- Develop over time
- Direct and indirect messages
- Establish parameters about what we are to think & feel
- Are malleable

Factors that put us at risk of implicit bias

Individual

Emotions

Such as anger, anxiety, fear & disgust

Exhaustion

When you are tired, overworked, etc.

Distraction

Multitasking, too many windows open

Stress

In a state of stress, crises, pressure, etc.

Structural/societal

Ambiguity

Lack of clear policy, process for decisions

Evaluation

Lack of processes for feedback and reflection

Social

Pressure to perform in particular ways

Diversity

Lack of diversity in decision-making spaces

Expedience Bias

Expedience bias happens when we take mental shortcuts to confirm our own beliefs and ignore other evidence. This tilts us toward answers that seem obvious, often at the expense of answers that might be more relevant or useful. It guides our behavior based on the notion that “It’s what’s most obvious, so it must be true.”

An example where “expedience bias” is at play:

An employee starts coming to work later than others on the team, and the supervisor assumes that they are not committed to the current project even though they are completing their tasks on time.

Examples of Expedience Bias

In supervisory evaluation:

Better ratings may be given to employees who complete a higher quantity of tasks as it is easier to measure than quality of work.

In hiring process:

In hiring, expedience bias may happen when we perceive a candidate as overqualified and assume that they will not be interested in the role or pay offered.

On teams:

A team member is quiet during meetings, often looking at their phone, and other team members make the assumption that this person is disengaged and unmotivated.

How to interrupt Expedience Bias

In supervisory evaluation: Consider the whole employee instead of selected metrics that describe their work, making sure the metrics being used are accurate descriptors of performance as opposed to easy talking points/fast-to-gather metrics. Collecting multiple data points through time, having regular check-ins, taking time with evaluations and using peer review.

In hiring process: The candidate that is perceived as overqualified may also be the strongest candidate in the pool and may have their reasons for applying to your role, even if you think salary will be too low for them.

On teams: Read about different communication styles to fully understand why people may engage differently during group meetings and to allow for them to make valuable contributions.

Halo and Horn effect

The halo and horn effect is about making snap judgments based on a perceived positive or negative attribute. In both situations, it's a failure to see the candidate as a whole. The halo effect comes into play when one becomes biased by certain positive things about a candidate that have no bearing on their ability to do a job well. The horn effect is the opposite of the halo effect. It comes into play when one cannot move past something they perceive as "negative" (but unrelated to the job) about an applicant.

An example where "halo and horn effect" is at play:

A candidate has published extensively in a high-impact journal in their field. As a result, hiring committees might overlook potential weaknesses in other areas of their application, such as teaching evaluations or interpersonal skills, assuming that their research prowess indicates overall excellence.

Examples of Halo and Horn effect

In supervisory evaluation:

Supervisors will base the employee ASA rating for the full year on a single positive achievement or difficulty instead of considering the whole period/performance.

In hiring process:

When reviewing a CV, we can identify a gap in employment for one of the candidates and fill in with our biases on why they were unemployed or why they left a certain organization. We may interpret these facts with a negative narrative without any context.

On teams:

Extroverted team members speak up more frequently and are given opportunities to present.

How to interrupt Halo and Horn effect

In supervisory evaluation: Consider different parts of performance and include these in the review process: one major accomplishment or lacking skill should not disproportionately impact a rating. This means gathering multiple data points to consider the whole picture of performance.

In hiring process: Stick to the requirements and desired skills included in the job posting at any and all steps in the recruiting process. You should hold all discussions in alignment with these requirements; this might interrupt assumptions made about an employee's career path.

On teams: Allow for all employees on the team to have growth opportunities, instead of picking those who consistently perform well.

Affect Bias

Affect bias is a biased shortcut our brains take to make decisions quickly based on our current emotions. The problem, of course, is that these decisions often have absolutely nothing to do with whether a person has the right skill set for an employment opportunity.

Examples of situations where affect bias may show up:

If you are having a particularly bad day, you may also have a “bad feeling” about a candidate, even if it has nothing to do with their qualifications for the job.

Examples of Affect Bias

In supervisory evaluation: Employees may have divergent communication styles that can create an emotional response in a supervisor. For example, someone who is extremely direct or doesn't sugar coat may be viewed as negative or aggressive. You allow your emotional response to an employee's communication style interfere with object evaluation of job performance.

In hiring process: You have recently been denied funding through a grant to which you just applied. You feel highly qualified for such professional opportunity and consider that rejection unfair. You let your own rejection interfere with the way you evaluate applicants for this role. None of them seem good enough.

On teams: A team member offers a critique of your work during a team meeting in front of others. The meeting moves on, and you feel frustrated about the interaction. You decide to avoid that person for a while and find yourself engaging in negative talk about them with others.

How to interrupt Affect Bias

In supervisory evaluation: Block time on your calendar during a time of day when you are alert and able to focus without interruption. Workplace differences are bound to occur. If they happen around evaluation time, this is especially challenging for supervisors. Try to give any emotional events space and time to settle before making evaluations for employees. If you need support to stay objective, consider mediation, FSAP or other resources.

In hiring process: Take time with a friend or colleague to process your frustration. Go for a walk before the hiring committee meetings to clear your head and be present during the meeting: be ready to evaluate candidates based on duties to be performed and requirements announced.

On teams: If you have see anything upsetting during a meeting, take time to talk with other employees about that occurrence. Engage with a feedback training to make sure that you have the skills to navigate these discussions (Crucial Conversations, or Clifton Strengths can be particularly helpful).

Similarity Bias

Similarity bias, or affinity bias, is the tendency to favor one candidate over another candidate because you share a characteristic trait or past experience with this candidate. The more similarities you share, the more you will gravitate toward this candidate. This could be the same cultural background, interests, or even having attended the same high school or college.

An example where “similarity bias” is at play:

An employee from a similar background/social identities as the supervisor gets more public acknowledgement and perhaps private encouragement from the supervisor.

Similarity Bias

In supervisory evaluation: Employees who are more similar will naturally socialize more with each other, these increased opportunities for engagement will naturally lead to better understanding of the work being performed. Managers need to be cognizant of their interactions with all direct reports so that equal opportunity for engagement exists to achieve accurate picture of performance.

In hiring process:

When screening or interviewing a candidate, you may unconsciously focus on assessing the similarities you share with the candidate, leading to a positive bias toward the candidate, even if they are not the most qualified for the role. An interviewer may rate a candidate more favorably just because they are both from the same state, they wrote their thesis under the same dissertation director or because they are part of the same ethnic group.

On teams:

Certain team members get more opportunities to talk, present, receive praise and are asked for their opinion/input. Those team members can also break some rules or behave in a disruptive manner without consequences.

How to interrupt Similarity Bias

In supervisory evaluation: Use objective evaluation criteria that is consistent between all employees in a group. If you use peer review, be sure to do this for everyone on your team. Be consistent in your interaction frequency and content with all members of your team. Present development opportunities to all employees. Make an effort to reach out to and check in with employees with different schedules, hobbies, or research topics from you. If you have divergent communication styles, taking Clifton strengths training can help you understand how different communication styles can work together effectively.

In hiring process: When hiring, please use a rubric in which you rate candidates based on required education, experience, knowledge, skills, abilities and desired qualifications as stated in the the job advertisement.

On teams: Take time to understand social identities other than your own. Read books, listen to podcasts, join DEI events. Use group norms to address how to communicate and treat each other during and between meetings. Make sure to include all voices in the creation of these norms, and ask everyone to help guide the group towards adhering to the norms.

Primacy and Recency Bias

Primacy bias takes place when you focus only on what happened first, ignoring all other aspects of a situation. Recency bias happens when you judge something based only on what happened most recently, instead of considering the whole situation.

An example where “primacy and recency bias” is at play:

Employees may be evaluated more favorably if they have recently had an award, publication or project completed or less favorably if they had a project timeline that was not met, or a difficult interpersonal interaction. These transient events do not necessarily constitute enough criteria to assign a specific rating.

Examples of Primacy and Recency Bias

In supervisory evaluation: A recent success or failure should not overly influence the overall performance rating for a year's performance.

In hiring process: Candidate's CV and cover letter emphasize an award they received for a recent presentation at the AMS conference. You overestimate that award without noticing that this is the first time this candidate attends a conference. Other candidates with similar profiles may have attended AMS every year in the last decade and gotten similar accolades in a more distant past.

On teams:

A team member misses an important deadline due to personal challenges and is then removed from a project (even after sustained prior good performance).

How to interrupt Primacy and Recency Bias

In supervisory evaluation: Consider the whole period of performance. Use periodic check ins to get multiple data points throughout the cycle and refer to these points in the formal evaluations. Encourage employees to keep notes in the ASA application and discuss multiple areas (successes and places where support may be needed).

In hiring process: Please make sure you review all application materials holistically and not place all focus on more recent achievements or those underlined by the candidate.

On teams: Use group norms to allow employees to ask for support when working through personal challenges.

Bias in recommendation letters

Implicit bias can impact the strength of a recommendation letter. [This resource](#), created by Asmeret Asefaw Berhe and Sora Kim, gives guidance on avoiding racial bias in letter writing. [This resource](#), created by the Lehigh University ADVANCE Center for Women STEM Faculty, addresses gender bias in letter writing and offers a gender bias calculator tool which you can use to analyze the language in your letter.

In a study of 886 chemistry or biochemistry faculty position letters of recommendation at a large U.S. research university, the use of language for male-identified candidates versus female-identified candidates revealed words focused on men's abilities and experiences and used "standout adjectives" while women's abilities and experiences were not as amplified (Schmader, et al, 2007).

For example:

- Words used for men: excellent, outstanding, exceptional, magnificent, unmatched
- Words used for women: careful, thorough, conscientious, hardworking
- Research words used for men: research, publication, contribution, discover
- Teaching words used for women: instructs, counselor, communicate, rapport

Schmader, T., Whitehead, J., Wysocki, V. (2007). A Linguistic Comparison of Letters of Recommendation for Male and Female Chemistry and Biochemistry Job Applicants. *Sex Roles*, 57(7-8), 509-514.

Why use Skillsurvey questionnaires for recommendations?

- Skillsurvey is an online reference check filled by professional references. They can be set up for 3 (entry level) or 5 references. Questionnaires vary based on discipline.
- Referees are asked to use a numerical scale of 1-7 to rate candidates on the areas of Professionalism, Interpersonal Skills, Problem Solving and Adaptability, Personal Value Commitment & Ability to work remotely.
- Referees are given instructions on how to use the numerical scale. Skillsurvey will map the score of your employee through comparisons to thousands of other candidates rated through that specific questionnaire.
- Skillsurvey will group all raters in one average score and also provide a second rating corresponding only to managers (at least 1 in required for entry level and 2 for standard).
- All questions include a rater differential which helps in determining agreement or disagreement between raters.

Why use Skillsurvey questionnaires for recommendations?

- Skillsurvey has focused questions related to job performance and professional skills and thus questions force evaluators to rate candidates on work-related competencies leaving little room for open narrative and personal information.
- Skillsurvey asks all raters to identify both strength and areas of needed improvement. This helps us identify red flags or targeted areas for supervisors to further explore or improve upon in the first years.
- You may still contact the references by email or invite them to join a call to discuss qualifications further or to elaborate on lower rated areas.

CIRES Resources:

Returning to our ideas about creating inclusive work environments, here are some resources.

- Teams can create their own unique norms or agreements that allow for transparency of expectations and an environment where all people feel comfortable giving feedback. Contact Becca for a group training. See handout on the [CIREs DEI Inside CIREs page](#).
- Continue to learn about lived experiences and social identities that are different than yours. You can [sign up for the CIREs DEI Newsletter](#) to receive resources to read and explore, and you can complete the online module for “Inclusive Workplace Culture”.
- There are many resources on this page as well! [Supervisor Resources on Inside CIREs](#)

Resources

WebMD. (n.d.). What is Confirmation Bias? <https://www.webmd.com/balance/what-is-confirmation-bias>

Happiful. (n.d.). What is cognitive bias? The halo and horn effect.
<https://happiful.com/what-is-cognitive-bias-the-halo-effect-and-horn-effect>

Cherry, K. (October 19, 2023) The Affect Heuristic and Decision Making.
<https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-the-affect-heuristic-2795028>

Diversity for Social Impact. (n.d.). What is Affinity Bias?
<https://diversity.social/affinity-bias-definition/>

The Decision Lab. (n.d.). Why do we only remember the first things on our grocery list? Primacy effect, explained.
<https://thedecisionlab.com/biases/primacy-effect>

<https://www.seattleu.edu/media/career-engagement/files/images/Identifying-Bias-in-Performance-Evaluations.pdf>

Project Management Workshop offered by Lauren Harris, CU Boulder, on March 7 2023 - [Video Recording](#) - [Worksheet](#)