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BIASES AND BREAKING THE HABIT

Provided by National University, [Center for Creative Leadership MBA](#)

LEADING A DIVERSE COMMUNITY

Imagine this common scenario: You're on your way to an appointment, and you plug the address into your GPS. Three blue lines suggest routes from point A to point B.

The shortcut looks tempting, but it's risky: Traffic is likely bad; there could be an accident on the road. Chances are, you're better off with the path that routes you around the city. Maybe it adds five minutes, but you're more likely to get to your final destination safe and sound.

A bias — an intentional or unintentional preference for a specific individual/group — is like a shortcut our brains take in an attempt to increase efficiency. And just like shortcuts in the car, biases can do more harm than good. When it comes to judging other people, our brains take a lot of shortcuts, often before we even realize it.

Leaders, especially those leading in a diverse community, must consistently work to see everything and everyone for who they are, without their perception being limited by their own biases. Leaders make critical decisions every day. They decide who is hired, promoted, or dismissed. They decide where to invest funds, when to bet on new ideas, and what the future of their organizations will be. Therefore, bias is a leadership liability.

TYPES OF BIASES

To understand how biases happen, it's helpful to look at two ways our brains process information.

The first is our gut reaction. Running on autopilot, the fight-or-flight response kicks in, and we make assumptions quickly without weighing all the information available to us.

The second response utilizes our higher cognitive brain functions. It enables us to evaluate that same information using logic and reasoning. Rather than jumping to conclusions, we take our time and respond deliberately.

When people are in unfamiliar or stressful situations, they tend to respond with a quick gut reaction, using past decisions to jump to conclusions. These mental shortcuts can lead to stereotyping without our being fully aware of it. Unintentional bias can have detrimental consequences, including inaccurate beliefs and unfair treatment of others.

Many of us share six cognitive biases:

Confirmation bias is our tendency to listen to and focus on information that confirms our own previously held beliefs.

Hindsight bias is our tendency to experience even random events as more predictable than they actually are. "I knew it all along," we may tell ourselves, as we look back on past events.



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Self-serving bias is our tendency to give ourselves credit for successes but blame failures on others.

Outcome bias is our tendency to evaluate decisions based on their outcomes, not based on how the decision was made.

In-group bias is our tendency to favor people who belong to our own group.

Blind-spot bias is our tendency not to notice our own biases.

BREAKING THE HABIT OF BIAS

According to research, bias is a habit that can begin to take shape at an early age. As we form our own social identities surrounding things like ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, religion, and gender, we start to identify as members of a specific group of people. These identities shape how we see the world — and how the world sees us.

In order to move beyond bias as leaders, we first have to recognize it. Be aware of signs of stereotypes, or generalized beliefs about groups and their members. Do you or your team members hold prejudices — unfavorable reactions to certain groups and their members? Do you notice discrimination, where some groups are being treated differently than others? Here's the good news: Because bias is a habit, you can change it. The Center for Creative Leadership's SCRIPT™ Toolkit offers five ways to break the habit of bias.

1. SELF-CARE

When we are tired, stressed, or distracted, our brains are more likely to take shortcuts. Self-care includes actions like regular exercise, mindfulness, and getting plenty of rest, which protects your well-being and decreases your likelihood to stereotype or make snap judgements. When you practice self-care, you show up to work at your best.

2. CONTACT

We tend to spend time with others who are similar to us, which ultimately reinforces our in-group and confirmation biases. Contact means seeking out opportunities to increase your exposure to people who have different social identities than you do. When you spend more time with a group of people, you naturally have more positive personal experiences.

3. RECOGNIZE AND REPLACE

Biases are often unintentional; however, if we pay attention, we begin to notice them. Imagine you have an open position on your team, and you're sorting through a stack of resumes. Are you naturally drawn toward applicants whose social identity matches your own? Are you naturally drawn toward applicants with a similar background and set of experiences? If you are, you may be recognizing your in-group bias.

Your next step is to challenge the stereotype, acknowledge potential consequences, and break the association. In the case of the resumes, you could start by reminding yourself that diverse teams are more creative, innovative, and productive. Then as you go through the resumes, change your focus from the candidate's name to the candidate's experience.



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4. INFORMATION

When we have a lack of information, we often fill in the gaps with stereotypes. But when we ask questions and gather data, we gather the information we need to counter and break down assumptions. Use metrics, gather information from multiple sources, and ask questions like, "What *don't* I know?"

5. PERSPECTIVE TAKING

Perspective taking involves taking the perspective of people who have different social identities than you do. Research has shown that when you imagine yourself in another person's shoes — when you truly think about living *their* life — you are able to decrease stereotypes by breaking down in-group bias.

When left unchecked, biases can lead to prejudice, discrimination, and stereotypes. Only when we recognize and acknowledge our own biases are we able to break the habit of bias. Then we give our teams a psychologically safe environment to dismantle systemic bias and build communities of accountability.

National University has partnered with the Center for Creative Leadership to create a Master of Business Administration that focuses on leadership. This partnership is driven by the 50-year history each institution holds, in both online adult education and leadership upskilling.

This article showcases content from the Leading in a Diverse Community course that is part of the CCL MBA program. To learn more about the CCL MBA, visit <https://nu.edu/cclmba/>.