

# Working Paper No. 3

## Getting to grips with unconscious bias

(Part of the Gender Worx Working Paper Series)

By Karen Morley, PhD, Co-founder Gender Worx



## Copyright Notice and Licence Terms

Insync Surveys is the exclusive owner of the copyright of this publication and reserves its rights in relation thereto.

This publication has been licensed in electronic form to the recipient. The purpose of this publication is to increase the knowledge of the recipient and to inform their actions by presenting the evidence for gender diversity best practice. It may not be used for any other purpose. The recipient must not use this publication, directly or indirectly, to compete with Gender Worx or Insync Surveys.

## References

For all references please refer to Working Paper References on the Gender Worx website.



## Getting to grips with unconscious bias

There is an increasing awareness that unconscious bias impacts decisions relating to men and women in organisations and that this is an important area for change, but less is known about what unconscious bias actually is, how it works and what it takes to change it.

Bias is unfair, illegitimate or unjustifiable judgement that goes beyond the objective needs or evidence in a particular situation.

As humans, we have many unconscious biases, and in organisations, our leadership decisions are subject to these biases. Biases like confirmation bias, which leads managers to ignore evidence that doesn't fit their views, or loss aversion, that makes them too cautious, lead to sub-optimal business decisions. Having these biases is simply a normal part of the human condition.

Gender biases lead managers to view talent in pre-determined ways, which leads to inequities and a loss of current and future capability and commitment. Bias based on gender plays out in three main domains: the person, the group and society. At the personal level it impacts expectations and behaviours of ourselves and others as men and women. At the level of the group, bias favours dominant group members, men, over non-dominant group members, women. At the level of society, gender biases drive culturally held power disparities between men and women.

Bias against women may be consciously held and openly expressed. However, most people are aware that the open expression of bias against women is not always socially acceptable. What they are less aware of is the impact of unconscious bias, which affects decisions without awareness. Even more challenging is that both women and men can demonstrate the same unconscious bias against women in leadership, and even those who openly express egalitarian attitudes can demonstrate the same unconscious bias. On the plus side, having unconscious bias doesn't necessarily lead to discrimination.

---

### *Gender schema at the heart of bias*

Gender is a concept that we learn early and thoroughly, and it is a primary guide for negotiating our actions in the world. Most importantly, it is a fundamental concept in understanding our own sense of identity. The most common question to follow a woman's announcement that she is pregnant is "is it a boy or a girl?" From birth, we engage in the world with gender schema as an important guide, and this shapes, enables and constrains us in particular ways.

As our gender schema is learnt so early and so thoroughly, it becomes unconscious to the point that, if we reflect on it at all, it seems the natural order of things.

Our gender schema ascribes and prescribes certain traits as male and others as female. These sets of traits form a schema, or stereotype, about what men and what women are like, and should be like.

Men are typically associated with a set of traits labeled 'agentic', such as focus on own needs, task oriented, tough, competitive, assertive, competent, ambitious, adventurous, dominant, forceful, independent, strong, autocratic, daring and active. Women are typically associated with a set of traits labeled 'communal', which include focus on the needs of others, empathy, understanding, gentle, kind, soft, expressive, fearful, wonderful, weak, sentimental and submissive. For most people, these associations are 'common sense'. They are such well



learned associations that we don't have to think hard to match the traits with the 'right' gender.

Both sets of traits are desirable, but in different ways. Men, as agentic, are respected, while women, as communal, are liked, reinforcing differential power attributions. Men are associated with power therefore with authority and status while women are associated with nurturing, lower status, and support roles.

Women and men are as likely to express gender stereotypes and perceive women as empathic and warm, and men as strong and ambitious. Women are as likely as men to favour male leaders over female leaders.

The pervasiveness of unconscious gender schema means that decisions about legitimate leadership are routinely biased against women and in favour of men.

---

*What is unconscious bias?*

Our unconscious capacities play a significant role in our practical decision making, ensuring that it is far from being the deliberative, systematic and analytical process we believe it to be. Thinking and judgement are already well under way before they enter the picture as conscious processes. There is a wide range of heuristics and biases that we use to make sense of the world that aid our decision making. While they are positive in helping us make sense of the world, they are also powerful contributors to misjudgment.

Our conscious minds process about 40 pieces of information each second, which is a small share of the total information available to us. It's estimated that our unconscious mind deals with between 8 million and 40 million pieces of information in that same second. Our unconscious mind handles all this information by taking a number of shortcuts using automatic associations that are learned patterns and this significantly aids our decision making, for example, we don't have to go into the same situation 50 times, experience it as brand new each time we do, and expend valuable conscious resources working out what to do.

The downside is that the shortcuts create bias and distortion - by categorising people as members of groups we minimise their individuality and shut down a host of valuable information.

---

*How does unconscious bias impact decisions?*

Our unconscious gender schema, which prescribes leadership as a male domain, lies at the heart of why men are disproportionately chosen ahead of women for leadership roles, even when managers believe they are being fair.

Gender schema is learnt early, thoroughly, stored in memory and accessed without awareness. What most people are unaware of is that we have an interesting duality of beliefs: our conscious and unconscious beliefs are quite likely to contradict each other. That's particularly the case for contentious issues, like gender and race. It applies to people who believe themselves to be egalitarian: conscious egalitarian beliefs co-exist with unconscious bias in the same person. In general, what we say represents our conscious beliefs, while what we do, particularly our nonverbal behaviour, is more representative of our unconscious beliefs.

The kinds of biased decisions that we make include:

- Creating expectations about and interpreting behaviour through the lens of gender schema
- Paying attention to information that confirms gender schema, for example, we pay attention to instances when women appear unconfident but disregard those instances when women display confidence



- Directing the context so that gender consistent information is elicited, for example, we are more likely to ask women about their children and so the conversation is directed to childrearing responsibilities
- Creating self-fulfilling prophecies through priming behaviour on the basis of gender schema: when women are primed for gender on maths tasks, their performance decreases in line with gender expectations that 'women are not good at maths'.

Conscious beliefs shape deliberative, well-considered responses where there is the opportunity to weigh costs and benefits of various courses of action.

Unconscious beliefs influence responses that are more difficult to control, such as nonverbal responses, or responses that are automatic that people don't try to 'control'. Unconscious beliefs influence us most when:

- We don't have clear decision criteria
- We don't have or take the time to deliberate on our decisions
- Information is ambiguous so it is not clear how it helps us make the decision
- There is no open scrutiny of the decision

---

*What can be done about unconscious bias?*

Changing unconscious beliefs means changing patterns of thought that have been established over a lifetime and have operated outside of awareness, so changing them requires dedication and focus.

A warning: trying to change unconscious beliefs may sometimes backfire, resulting in strengthened bias. Being forced to engage in training or awareness of unconscious bias can strengthen bias, as can attempting to suppress it.

What does work is:

- Understanding what unconscious bias is and how it works
- Becoming aware of the unconscious biases we hold
- Recognising that unconscious beliefs may be quite different from our espoused beliefs – when people discover that their unconscious beliefs are contradictory to their espoused egalitarian views, they can be highly motivated to change and become particularly aware of their behaviour in group settings
- Ensuring a context in which bias can be controlled, for example, making considered decisions rather than decisions on the fly and focusing on congruence between nonverbal and verbal behaviour
- Increasing the transparency of decision processes and outcomes
- Changing the automatic gender associations we have by practicing different associations, such as woman strong, and man warm

In the short term, eliminating bias is unrealistic and unlikely. Attuning people to their own biases builds awareness and starts a change process. Mindful attention to the likelihood of bias in a range of situations, such as selection and development processes and making use of deliberative decision processes sets up the opportunity to minimise unconscious bias.

For more information about unconscious bias, please contact Karen Morley on 0438 215 391 or at [kmorley@genderworx.com.au](mailto:kmorley@genderworx.com.au). At Gender Worx we help organisations learn more about unconscious bias and facilitate training sessions, workshops and dialogues that explore gender issues, particularly the impact of gender bias.



## About Gender Worx

Gender Worx is a specialist gender diversity practice. We are thought leaders, experts and consultants to organisations in gender diversity measurement and change. We assist organisations to unlock the potential of women and help make organisations:

- better places to work; and
- more productive and profitable

Gender Worx is a specialist division of Insync Surveys, stakeholder survey and consulting specialists and a 2009 BRW Fast 100 Company.

Visit [www.genderworx.com.au](http://www.genderworx.com.au)

Contact [info@genderworx.com.au](mailto:info@genderworx.com.au)

## About Insync Surveys

Insync Surveys has one of the largest suites of leading edge integrated benchmarked stakeholder surveys in the world. Its surveys are distributed in over 30 countries and in over 15 languages and include surveys for employees, customers, boards, community groups and many other organisation stakeholders.

Insync Surveys has carried out surveys for some of the largest public, private, government and not-for-profit organisations in Asia Pacific. It is based in Australia and has representatives in New Zealand, Asia, UK and North America. Insync Surveys' technology also powers the surveys of Board Benchmarking and Gender Worx.

Visit [www.insyncsurveys.com.au](http://www.insyncsurveys.com.au)

Contact [info@insyncsurveys.com.au](mailto:info@insyncsurveys.com.au)

## Our book

To find out about or to buy our book, *Unlocking Gender Potential: a leader's handbook*, visit [www.genderworx.com.au](http://www.genderworx.com.au)

Contact Gender Worx  
at the following offices  
of Insync Surveys

Melbourne  
Level 7  
91 William Street  
Melbourne  
VIC 3000  
Australia  
Tel. +61 3 9909 9209  
Fax. +61 3 9614 4460

Sydney  
Level 2  
110 Pacific Highway  
North Sydney  
NSW 2060  
Australia  
Tel. +61 2 8081 2000  
Fax. +61 2 9955 8929