

A photograph of a man and a woman in business attire shaking hands in front of a modern building. The man is on the left, wearing a dark blue suit and a light blue tie, looking up and smiling. The woman is on the right, wearing a light-colored blazer, looking down at the handshake. The background shows a modern building with large windows and a glass facade.

# Everyday Bias

Further Explorations into How the  
Unconscious Mind Shapes Our World at Work

An Evolving Understanding of Unconscious Bias  
Offers Opportunities for Improving Performance at Your Place of Work

by Howard Ross, Founder and Chief Learning Officer, Cook Ross Inc.

# Everyday Bias: Further Explorations into How the Unconscious Mind Shapes Our World at Work

An Evolving Understanding of Unconscious Bias Offers Opportunities for Improving Performance at Your Place of Work

*by Howard Ross, Founder and Chief Learning Officer, Cook Ross Inc.*

## INTRODUCTION

Hurricanes were exclusively assigned female names until the late 1970's. Since then, the World Meteorological Association (WMA) has alternatively given them male and female names. In May of 2014, the Proceedings of the National Academy of Science released the results of an interesting study from the University of Illinois<sup>1</sup>. Researchers analyzed more than sixty years of death tolls from ninety four hurricanes that occurred in the United States between 1950 and 2012. They removed two hurricanes whose death tolls were so dramatically greater than the others that they would skew the data: Hurricane Katrina, which killed approximately 1,500 people in 2005, and Hurricane Audrey, which killed more than 400 in 1957. The researchers then compared the death rates of the hurricanes based on the gender classification of their names.

What they found was fascinating.

It turns out that there is a dramatic difference between the average death rates of the storms named for men (23) and those named for women (45). Was this because the WMA chose female names for the harshest storms? Not unless they had a crystal ball. The names, it turns out, are designated years before the actual hurricanes. The difference, it seems, lies not in the naming of the storms, but in the reaction to the storms' names. "People may be dying as a result of the femininity of a hurricane (name)," said Sharon Shavitt, one of the studies co-authors. "In judging the intensity of a storm, people appear to be applying their beliefs about how men and women behave," Shavitt says. "This makes a female-named hurricane, especially one with a very feminine name such as Belle or Cindy, seem gentler and less violent."

---

<sup>1</sup> "Female hurricanes are deadlier than male hurricanes" National Academy of Sciences, Jung, Shavitt, Viswanathan, and Hilbe, May 2014 Kiju Jung, Sharon Shavitt, Madhu Viswanathan, and Joseph M. Hilbe

Female hurricanes are deadlier than male hurricanes

PNAS 2014; published ahead of print June 2, 2014, doi:10.1073/pnas.1402786111

Is it possible that people consciously choose to take female-named hurricanes less seriously? Is it likely that during times of emergency preparedness somebody says, or even thinks, “Don’t worry about that one...she’s just a girl!”? Doubtful. It is much more likely that this is yet one more example of unconscious bias at work.

Unconscious or implicit bias is an issue that affects every person and every organization, no matter how inclusive people think they may be, or how diverse their organization has tried to become.

## Everyone possesses unconscious biases, and they impact us in ways that we can hardly imagine.

The encouraging news is that breakthroughs in our understanding of this fascinating topic offer new opportunities for organizations that truly wish to create inclusive workplaces and diverse employee populations.



At Cook Ross, we published our first major thought paper on unconscious bias (<http://www.cookross.com/docs/unconsciousbias.pdf>) in 2007. That paper concentrated on the definition, reality and prevalence of unconscious bias. Since that time, our understanding of unconscious bias and its implications for organizational performance has expanded greatly. Our discoveries arise not only from research in the neurological and cognitive sciences, but also—and perhaps more importantly—from our experience with thousands of clients. This work has permitted us to gain a deeper understanding of how individual and group behaviors affect organizational performance.

The collective body of knowledge about this topic has also grown exponentially. The topic has been brought to public view in a way that allows us to address problems with broader strokes, addressing the full impact of unconscious bias.



This paper represents an update in our learnings on unconscious bias since we published the original paper. I will discuss some of those new findings and will also lay out ten distinct ways unconscious bias manifests in the workplace, including a case study from a Cook Ross client, a leading global management consulting company that has leveraged unconscious bias awareness to increase the number of women in senior leadership positions. Lastly, the paper presents practical guidelines for reducing the influence of unconscious bias on decision-making in the talent management process.

## UNCONSCIOUS BIAS: WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

The concept of unconscious bias in organizations was initially recognized in the 1960s, against a backdrop of hiring changes that were brought about by federal civil rights legislation and changes in societal social norms. Bias is culturally rooted, and generally directed at value and belief systems different from our own. Bias falls into the realm of the unconscious when it transcends our moment-to-moment perception and awareness. For instance, a person may know “instinctively” when they feel physically threatened without knowing the exact source or location of the threat. Ultimately, the impact of bias may not be different whether it is conscious or unconscious. Both can create inequities in opportunity and treatment, and also very poor decision-making. However, our understanding of how unconscious they are may radically alter our way of dealing with these biases and creating more conscious organizations.

Distinguishing friend from foe is essential to our survival. The ability to do so quickly might mean the difference between life and death. As a result, our minds tend to look for danger first, a clear precautionary function. We are far safer assuming danger and being surprised when it is not there, then in assuming all is safe and finding danger instead. In a survival context, a “false positive” is always safer than a “false negative.” As a result, we may unconsciously look for cues that identify something as threatening in a person we encounter, based on what we have experienced before. This may make a lot of sense in terms of keeping us safe, but when a job candidate with qualifications similar to another person is given a low rating because they “don’t feel” like a good fit, it becomes problematic.

Organizations that wish to create diverse employee populations and more inclusive workplaces have struggled for decades with



cultural bias and with trying to attain “cultural competency.” The essential ingredient in culturally competent organizations is the recognition that re-training the conscious “rational” mind to achieve behavioral change is often largely ineffectual. Leaders in particular need to recognize that we don’t always consciously know exactly what in our organizations needs adjustment. Let me cite an example to clarify.

Research has shown that people tend to believe others more when they have similar accents.<sup>2</sup> Let us say a person is not aware that they consistently exhibit a preference for team members who speak with the same kind of accent that they do. (Of course, for most people, accents and dialects only exist when they are present in other people who speak differently from them...an unconscious bias in itself!) Creating systems and structures that reveal those patterns and help explore areas of discomfort are critical. Avoiding difficult conversations about bias will lead to poor talent management decisions and many other inefficiencies. Still, views and preferences among people will continue to legitimately

---

<sup>2</sup> Shiri Lev-Ari, Boaz Keysar, Why don’t we believe non-native speakers? The influence of accent on credibility. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 46 (2010) 1093-1096.

differ. We may still prefer our own unconscious or conscious views and our own patterns of thinking and behavior. They feel more comfortable to us. The challenge is that “comfortable” feelings are not necessarily synonymous or strategically aligned with organizational goals and priorities. “Comfortable” could prevent you from getting the best talent and organizational results.

Developing an awareness of our own biases is the foundation for making better decisions. Why? If you are in possession of that awareness, you can take advantage of our growing understanding of unconscious bias and its implications for organizational success and failure. The available body of knowledge has exploded during the past six years as discoveries unfold from research in the neurological and cognitive sciences.

New findings are teaching us more about the brain and consciousness than we have ever known. Some of this work is valuable and is based on solid evidence. Some is not as well reasoned. Too often the approaches that people take in applying research findings to organizational behavior are missing the fundamental basis of what the research findings are actually teaching us.

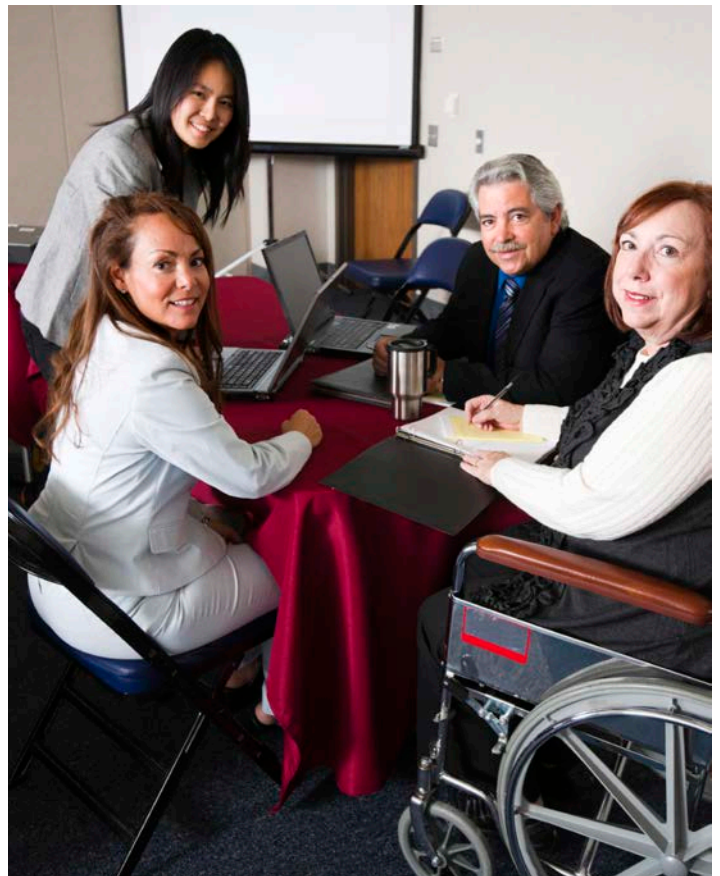
## What one can only surmise from the findings of the best research is just how universal unconscious bias is...in everyone.

While unconscious bias still may not be fully understood, many organizational leaders today at least agree that it is real, prevalent, and a barrier to organizational success. To help bring understanding of unconscious bias to a new level, let’s examine several issues that have been recently researched and brought to public view. Some of these insights are discussed in my books, *ReInventing Diversity: Transforming Organizational Community to Strengthen People, Purpose, and Performance* (2011), and *Everyday Bias: Identifying and Navigating Unconscious Judgments in Our Daily Lives* (2014).

### NOT INHERENTLY BAD OR GOOD: IT’S JUST THERE

Our everyday use of the word bias has a distinctly negative connotation. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines bias as an “unreasoned judgment” or “prejudice.” In working with diversity issues, we have been told repeatedly that bias is bad. Bias carries a stigma. If you are biased, the prevailing discourse suggests you also must be a bigot or one who practices discrimination. Therefore, we must eliminate bias.

We make a fundamental mistake when reducing bias to something purely “bad.” Too often we conflate people’s intentions with the impact of their actual behavior or we make attribution errors. If we believe good people are free of bias, then someone who has bias must be bad and must intend to harm. As a result, people have created “anti-bias” training and



practices. Bias, however, is not inherently bad or good. As discussed in our original paper, bias is a fundamental function of the human mind. It is a danger detector that allows us to navigate the world safely. By attempting to eliminate bias, all too often we have actually driven it more into the unconscious.

In order to expand the conversation, it is critical for us to recognize that these biases can be positive or negative and can have constructive or destructive outcomes.

## How does bias occur?

|          |  |   |
|----------|--|---|
| Negative | Constructive uses of negative biases<br>Q2 | Destructive uses of negative biases<br>Q1 |
|          | Q3   | Q4  |
| Positive | Constructive uses of positive biases       | Destructive uses of positive biases       |
|          | Constructive                               | Destructive                               |

We are most familiar, of course, with destructive uses of negative bias (Q1). The classic case of someone not being hired or promoted because they belong to a particular group exemplifies this kind of bias. But there are also constructive uses of negative bias (Q2). For example, when we realize that a particular behavior (e.g. raising one’s hand with a knife in it pointed at you) should be avoided or protected against. There may also be constructive uses of positive bias (Q3), as when we recognize that a person with a particular cultural background may be valuable in a certain position in which people from that culture are prevalent. Another example occurs when we decide to hire people with particular “qualifications,” which are simply biases that we have all agreed to and written down. And, finally, there are times when there are destructive uses of positive bias, as when we hire one person because they “feel familiar” and in doing so do not hire someone who is more talented. We live in a web of all of these biases.

## CONFRONTING BIAS CONSTRUCTIVELY

Understanding this basic truth is not quite enough. We must be vigilant and recognize biases as they arise. We must not allow the unconscious nature of bias to work as an excuse for the impact of it to continue. For example, we may believe that not having conscious intent is enough to negate the negative impact of something we say or do. We get into an offensive/defensive posture because we don’t have the capacity to look at the issue from anything other than the right/wrong perspective. Past attempts at diversity training have often reflected this moralizing approach. We have tried to show people how wrong they are, thinking that in and of itself would force them to change. The problem is that guilt may seem effective as a motivator, but in reality, it is not. Guilt leads to self-recrimination, which is destructive rather than constructive. More often than not, guilt creates contraction, resistance, forced compliance, and sometimes, backlash.

It has been fascinating to see unconscious bias proliferate as a topic throughout the diversity industry within the past several years. Basically, good and reasoned research done with the purest of intentions gets plugged into the traditional “good person/bad person” paradigm of diversity work. “You may not be biased,” the trainer often says, “but you are unconsciously biased!!”

We believe passionately in the connections between neuroscience research, diversity, and organizational performance. For instance, we know that unconscious bias is present, but how, honestly, can we reasonably castigate someone for reacting in a way that they don’t even realize is happening in the first place? This is not to suggest that people are not responsible for the impact of their behavior. All of us are responsible for our behavior. Our challenge is to determine whether or not our way of creating opportunities for insight and behavior change is appropriate and effective. After all, what the research clearly shows is that “they” are not the ones who demonstrate bias. “We” are the ones who demonstrate bias. All of us, every day. The key is not to drive people toward guilt, but to move us all toward responsibility. The daunting task of leaders is to create mechanisms to help people

develop an understanding of how these subtle and often invisible dynamics might be benefiting them or affecting them in ways that they haven't realized and haven't always intended.

The reality is that good people develop bias. Bad people develop bias. All people develop bias. The question is: how we can see bias in others if we're not even willing to look at it in ourselves? While there is no question that certain groups are more negatively impacted by bias on a grand societal scale, the limiting patterns of unconscious behavior are not restricted to any one group. All of us have these attitudes and exhibit these behaviors. Effective managers and business leaders must focus on their own assumptions and biases if they expect to have the legitimacy and experience to guide others in acknowledging and confronting their bias.

And here lies the fault lines of neuroscience, personal behavior, organizational behavior, organizational performance and societal health (economic and otherwise). The work needs to be conducted on an organizational level, in a manner that allows individuals and groups to solve problems and create value. But we do this with the understanding that the connections stretch from our organizational learning out to society and the world.



## NEW RESEARCH FINDINGS

As Brett Pelham, a social psychologist at the American Psychological Association has said:

“Virtually all bias is unconscious bias. We have learned to trust women to be nurturing and men to be powerful, for example, in much the same way that Pavlov’s puppies trusted ringing bells to predict the arrival of meat powder. If we had to think consciously about keeping our balance, digesting, breathing and perceiving the moon as a celestial sphere rather than a floating coin, we would all fall over, throw up, suffocate, and fail to appreciate the moon’s majestic beauty. Being biased is how we get through life without everything being brand new every time we experience it.”

The new reality that science is teaching us is that virtually everything we do is driven by unconscious thoughts, reactions, feelings, and beliefs. In a way, we are far more robotic in our thinking and actions than we have ever realized. In addition, our automatic thoughts happen much faster than our more careful ones. New research findings are teaching us how unconscious bias forms and operates in the brain. The prefrontal neocortex (PFC) is the part of the brain that most distinguishes humans from all other animals. It gives people the capacity for metacognition, or the capacity to think about our thinking. This makes humans more able to contemplate thoughts and behavior than any other animal. Yet, the “computing power” of the PFC is relatively tiny compared to the far more robust autonomic parts of the brain. In order to conserve our mental resources and the internal chemicals (e.g., glucose) that feed the brain, we naturally rely on our “automatic” functions and reactions. It is not efficient for the brain to stop and really think about each stimulus and response. In fact, it is downright dangerous. Imagine, for example, if we had to stop and think about hitting the brake when somebody stops short in front of us while we are driving. How many of us would react quickly enough to avoid hitting the car?

Since the time of Plato, we have generally believed our rational minds need to “control” our emotional or subconscious minds in order for us to function at the highest level. The reverse appears more likely to be true.

Think about it. If somebody asks “1+1=?” you react pretty quickly. If they ask “223 x 175” you move much more slowly. You need more brainpower. You need to compute, not recite from memory. Assumptions about people fitting into stereotypes operate the same way. It is much quicker and easier

to form the unconscious first impression, “She is/ looks/does \_\_\_\_\_, so therefore she must be like \_\_\_\_\_” than it is to say, “Let me stop and see what I can learn about her.”



We are beginning to better understand how this organic mechanism works. The memory connections that we make seem to occur in the hippocampus, a part of the limbic system of the brain next to, and closely associated with, the amygdala. The way it works is actually very logical at some level. Let’s say I am walking down the street and a man with a red shirt attacks me. In the hippocampus, “red shirt” becomes connected to pain. Three months later, I meet somebody wearing a red shirt and I begin to feel “uncomfortable” with that person. I may not have any conscious memory that my attacker was wearing a red shirt or that my discomfort has anything to do with the attack at all. It just occurs at the moment as fear of potential danger.

Similarly, imagine that you have grown up watching the whole slew of early sitcoms on television that depicted fathers as the “bread winners” and mothers as the homemakers. You might remember at least a few of them: Ozzie and Harriet; Leave it to Beaver; Father Knows Best; etc. Really, the list is practically endless. In your brain, specifically in your hippocampus, women and domestic chores may have become linked. Then years later, a woman comes into a meeting and, without thinking, you say, “Would you mind getting some coffee?” Or, even more

insidiously, if you are a woman, you automatically get the coffee without even being asked to do so! Yes, we even internalize unconscious biases about people like ourselves.

As I stated earlier, we are learning more and more about this subject and how it functions. Let’s now look at examples of research published since the 2007 paper that help illustrate these concepts.

## THE HIRING PROCESS

Getting a job is of paramount importance for millions of people around the world, and generally receiving an offer requires going through an interview or even many interviews. We know that our beliefs about people—most of them existing beyond our awareness—lead to automatic thinking and behaviors that inevitably appear when interviewing and hiring. Let’s have a look at a few touch points where our unconscious bias surfaces in the hiring process.

### “PRIMING EFFECTS”

We are discovering that the information and messages we use to inform our decisions are much more subtle and non-rational than we ever realized. Lawrence Williams, a marketing professor at the University of Colorado and John Bargh, a psychologist at the Automaticity in Cognition, Motivation, and Emotion Lab at Yale University, conducted a series of fascinating experiments<sup>3</sup> about a phenomenon they refer to as “the priming effect.” They studied test subjects who were asked to conduct job interviews. Everything about the people they interviewed was structured to be as similar as possible except for the fact that some of the interviewers were given warm drinks while they were conducting the interviews and some cold drinks. Based on nothing more than that, the interviewers who were holding the warm drinks scored their interviewees higher than those holding the cold ones. They attributed a “warmer personality” to these people. We are not certain why such attributions were made.

<sup>3</sup> Citations for Williams and Bargh’s work can be found at the Yale University Automaticity in Cognition Lab Page: <http://www.yale.edu/acmelab/publications.html>



Perhaps our common societal messaging about people having a “cold heart” or a “warm smile” has created a neurolinguistic encoding within our brains. We also know that a cold hand may be interpreted unconsciously as signaling that a person is less friendly, less healthy, less robust, or less confident. Either way, the result is a non-rational way of conducting interviews and scoring job candidates.

Mikki Hebl and Laura Mannix, two Rice University researchers, found a similar dynamic exists when an interviewer was asked to walk out and meet his or her interview subject in a waiting area<sup>4</sup>. If the interviewee was sitting next to somebody who was perceived to be obese, they rated him or her lower in their interview scores. Talk about guilt by association!

Both of these studies, and many others like them, naturally bother people who believe in fairness and equity in job decisions. After all, how fair is it to be more likely to select somebody simply because they are sitting next to a particular person in the lobby, or because you happen to have a warmer drink in your hand? It seems ridiculous, doesn't it?

However, the more pressing issue to business people may be:

## How can we run an effective, productive and profitable organization when we make talent management decisions based on such ludicrous and invisible conditions?

### EYES, COFFEE, HONESTY, AND THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

Unconscious bias makes its mark known in many areas involving employees that go well beyond hiring. In another recent study, researchers Melissa Bateson, Daniel Nettle, and Gilbert Roberts at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne in Great Britain put signs on the walls of break rooms in companies that asked people to pay for their coffee, tea, and snacks on the “honor system.”<sup>5</sup> Some of the notes had flowers on them, others photographs of eyes.



#### COFFEE CLUB

Prices:

Coffee (with or without milk): 50p

Tea (with or without milk): 30p

Milk only (in your own coffee or tea): 10p

Full cup of milk: 30p

Please put your money in the blue tin.

It turned out that people were more honest when the note on the wall had pictures of eyes looking at them rather than flowers. Now why should photos of eyes be more likely to rationally propel anyone toward honesty?

The findings from this study are consistent with a studies conducted by Dan Arielly, the Duke University behavioral economist, who found that students were more honest in grading themselves in tests when they had simply been asked to read the Ten Commandments before taking the test<sup>6</sup>. Feeling like we are being watched or being reminded of our “moral compass” seems to have an impact on us, even when it is simply a piece of paper on the wall or a list to read!

<sup>4</sup> Michelle R. Hebl and Laura M. Mannix  
The Weight of Obesity in Evaluating Others: A Mere Proximity Effect  
Pers Soc Psychol Bull January 2003 29: 28-38, doi:10.1177/0146167202238369

<sup>5</sup> Melissa Bateson, Daniel Nettle, and Gilbert Roberts  
Cues of being watched enhance cooperation in a real-world setting  
Biol Lett. Sep 22, 2006; 2(3): 412-414. June 27, 2006. doi: 10.1098/rsbl.2006.0509

<sup>6</sup> Dan Arielly, The Honest Truth About Dishonesty: How We Lie to Everyone--Especially Ourselves, Pub by Harper Perennial June 2013.

## ISN'T UNCONSCIOUS BIAS REALLY ABOUT STEREOTYPING?

Now that it has been examined how warm drinks, staring eyes, and the Ten Commandments relate to unconscious bias, let's look at the all-too prevalent thought that unconscious bias is all about stereotyping. It's true that much of what we think of as "bias" has a lot to do with stereotyping, be it racial or addressed to other facets of our identities. However, it may be far more complex than that in reality.

Amy Cuddy, a social psychologist at the Harvard Business School, has conducted some of the most interesting research done on stereotyping.<sup>7</sup> Cuddy distinguished two basic kinds of bias. One form is based on how warmly we feel toward people and how inclined we are to like them, to be empathetic toward them, and to see them as somebody to whom we can personally relate. The second is based on what we think of the person's competency.



We can see one example of the importance of these distinctions in the current marketplace. One group that has felt the sting of unconscious bias in the recent employment marketplace is people over age 50. While we may have no "dislike" of people in this age group, researchers at Harvard have found that about 90 percent of Americans associate negative competency traits with the

"elderly." What they also found was that these negative ideas were just as prevalent among people who were 60 or older as they were among people 20 or younger. We may "like" somebody very much, and still have strong negative biases about their competency.

We can see one example of the importance of these distinctions in the current marketplace. One group that has felt the sting of unconscious bias in the recent employment marketplace is people over age 50. While we may have no "dislike" of people in this age group, researchers at Harvard have found that about 90 percent of Americans associate negative competency traits with the "elderly." What they also found was that these negative ideas were just as prevalent among people who were 60 or older as they were among people 20 or younger. We may "like" somebody very much, and still have strong negative biases about their competency.

All of this research tells us that our decisions that involve stereotyping are neither intentional nor rational. They make no sense; yet, these decisions run our lives, often in unintended ways.

## TEN DISTINCT WAYS THAT BIAS SURFACES

Over the course of the past ten years, we have examined hundreds of research studies on unconscious bias. This does not even include all of the anecdotal examples that we have all seen and experienced first hand while working with clients. All of this research leads to the conclusion that there are at least 10 distinct ways that unconscious bias manifests itself in the workplace and in many other areas of life. They are:

1. **Diagnosis Bias:** The propensity to label people, ideas, or things based on our initial perceived opinion. Dozens of studies demonstrate the way our quick decisions about people affect the way we treat them. Simply think of a time when you saw somebody, made an assumption about him

<sup>7</sup> Cuddy, Amy J.C., Peter Glick, and Anna Beninger. "The Dynamics of Warmth and Competence Judgments, and Their Outcomes in Organizations." *Research in Organizational Behavior* 31 (2011): 73-98.

or her, and then acted accordingly. How many times have you made assumptions like that about people? The truth is, it has probably happened any time that you've met somebody new. We "scope them out," without having to think about doing it. It is just the way we are "wired."

2. **Pattern Recognition:** The tendency to sort and identify information based on prior experience or habit. This is a fundamental protective mechanism of the mind. If we see something in a person that has been dangerous for us—or that we think has been dangerous for us, or even reminds of us something that has been dangerous for us—we don't wait to determine whether or not it will threaten us this time. Instead, we immediately respond. This is very much like staying away from a hot stove after having been burned by one before.
3. **Value Attribution:** The inclination to imbue a person or thing with certain qualities based on initial perceived value. An example of this was an experiment conducted by the Washington Post, when the noted violinist Joshua Bell was asked to play in a subway station in Washington D.C., looking like the typical itinerant subway troubadour.<sup>8</sup> Almost nobody stopped to listen, even though the night before he had sold out the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.
4. **Confirmational Behavior:** The tendency to look for what confirms our beliefs and to ignore what contradicts our beliefs while disregarding facts that contradict our point of view. This is often called the "Pygmalion Effect," or the self-fulfilling prophecy.
5. **Automatic Perception:** The reflexive reaction to a particular person, object or situation based on unconscious associations and expectations. One example of this was a

groundbreaking study, conducted at MIT and the University of Chicago, in which identical résumés with "traditionally White" and "traditionally Black" names were sent to companies looking to hire people.<sup>9</sup> A total of 50 percent more of the people with traditionally White names were called back for interviews. Similar results were found in studies conducted in Singapore with traditionally dominant Chinese surnames and in Sweden with traditionally dominant Swedish surnames.



Another similar study was recently conducted by Jo Handelsman, a Professor of Molecular, Cellular & Developmental Biology at the Yale School of Medicine. Handelsman gave science professors a one-page synopsis about a potential hire.<sup>10</sup> When the name "John" was put on the document, the candidate was rated a "4" on a 7-point scale and was offered an average starting salary of \$30,328. When the exact same document was distributed with simply the name "Jennifer" replacing "John," the rating was 3.3 and the salary offered was \$26,508. A stunning aspect of this study was that there was no difference between male and female professors in their relative gender assessments.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Gene Weingarten, Pearls Before Breakfast – Can one of the nation's greatest musicians cut through the fog of a D.C. rush hour? Washington Post, April 8, 2007. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/04/AR2007040401721.html>

<sup>9</sup> Marianne Bertrand and Senhild Mullainathan, Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field experiment on Labor Market Discrimination. The American Economic Review, Vol 94. No. 4, (September 2004), pp. 991-1013.

<sup>10</sup> Moss-Racusin, C.A., J.F. Dovidio, V.L. Brescoll, M.J. Graham, and J. Handelsman. 2012. Science faculty's subtle gender biases favor male students. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. 109(41): 16474-16479. Anderson, W. A., U. Banerj

<sup>11</sup> "Bias Persists for Women of Science, a Study Finds," New York Times, September 24, 2012

6. **Selective Attention/Inattentive Blindness:** The propensity to see some things and not others dependent upon what a person is paying attention to at a particular moment. This explains why pregnant women tend to see lots of other pregnant women, or when you are thinking of buying a car you seem to see advertisements for that car every time you turn around. It also explains why two people can look at the same picture and see different things. One of the most well known examples of this is the experiment originally conducted by Daniel Simons, a professor in the Department of Psychology and the Beckman Institute for Advanced Science and Technology at the University of Illinois, and Chris Chabris, Associate Professor of Psychology and Co-Director of the Neuroscience Program, Union College.<sup>12</sup> Simons and Chabris developed a video showing two groups of students passing basketballs back and forth and asked the viewers to count the number of times the team in white completed a pass. During the sequence a person in a gorilla suit walks across the scene, stops and beats its chest, and then walks off, and yet few people ever see the gorilla because we are so busy counting the passes!
7. **Priming Effect:** The inclination to respond to something based on expectations created by a previous experience or association. (The “cold drink/hot drink” experiment outlined earlier is a demonstration of this phenomenon.)
8. **Commitment Confirmation/Loss Aversion:** Our tendency to maintain belief or support in something because we have committed to it, and because we want to avoid possible losses. Most of us have experienced this one. We choose somebody for something, perhaps hire him or her, and then are reluctant to admit we made a bad choice. This is kind of like continuing to throw good money into a poker game, even though we know we have a bad hand!
9. **Stereotype Threat:** The experience of anxiety or concern in a situation where a person has the potential to confirm a negative stereotype about their social group. This has often been referred to as “internalized oppression” and was, perhaps, most famously demonstrated in the well-known experiment conducted by Drs. Mamie and Kenneth Clark with black children who, when offered white or black dolls to play with, preferred to play with white dolls.<sup>13</sup> This important experiment is known to have influenced the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education school desegregation ruling. In more recent studies, Professor Claude Steele found that simply asking African American students to report their race before taking their SAT tests significantly lowered their scores.<sup>14</sup> Being reminded of being black seemed to internalize a negative performance bias. Similarly, in a 1995 study by psychology professors Margaret Shih, Todd L. Pittinsky and Nalini Ambady, Asian female students were shown to perform significantly higher on math tests when they were reminded of their Asian identity rather than their gender identity.<sup>15</sup>
10. **Anchoring Bias:** The common tendency to rely too heavily or “anchor” on one trait or piece of information when making decisions. Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman and his research partner, Amos Tversky, famously identified this bias.<sup>16</sup> For example, do you automatically assume, without questioning, that people who come from elite schools are better qualified than others? Or that certain personality types are “more professional”?



<sup>12</sup> [http://www.theinvisiblegorilla.com/gorilla\\_experiment.html](http://www.theinvisiblegorilla.com/gorilla_experiment.html)

<sup>13</sup> Clark, Kenneth; Mamie Clark (1950). “The Negro child in the American social order”. *The Journal of Negro Education* 19 (3): 341–350

<sup>14</sup> Claude M. Steele and Joshua Aronson, Stereotype Threat and Intellectual Test Performance of African Americans, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol 69(5), Nov 1995, 797-811. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.69.5.797

<sup>15</sup> Margaret Shih, Todd L. Pittinsky, and Nalini Ambady, “Stereotype Susceptibility: Shifts in Quantitative Performance from Socio-Cultural Identification,” *Psychological Science* 10, no. 1 (January 1999): 80–83.

<sup>16</sup> Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases. *Science, New Series*, Vol. 185, No. 4157. (September 27, 1974), pp. 1124-1131.

## CASE STUDY: A GLOBAL MANAGEMENT CONSULTING COMPANY

**The Situation:** A division of a leading global management consulting company engaged Cook Ross to lead a group intervention for a business line of more than 50,000 employees working worldwide to increase the number of women in senior leadership by focusing on the role of unconscious bias in hiring.

**The Cook Ross Work:** The effort began by bringing together executive leaders and then a group of 150 senior leaders to engage in dialogue about the impact of unconscious bias on their organizational culture. They subsequently expanded the education effort to include leaders throughout their global system. In addition, an internal train-the-trainer program was created using videoed content and live facilitation. All leaders were exposed to Unconscious bias education. Unconscious bias education was also provided to their accounts, and account leads were held responsible for increasing the diversity on the account teams.

In addition to education, structures and systems were recreated. More jobs were posted so that others outside of those on top of mind could have the opportunity to apply. Each geographical group submitted a diversity strategic plan that they were accountable for delivering on and reporting on it monthly. They also were expected to put together teams to deliver on the plans. All of the human resources functions were tasked with realigning their processes to mitigate bias in the talent management process, and decision-tools were created to encourage more conscious talent management practices.

Top managers also began to make discussions about bias a part of every management meeting and top leaders were vocal in providing leadership for the effort by talking about how their worldview was shaped by their own biases. Individual leaders received coaching to assist them in transforming their leadership approaches.

**The Outcome:** The division's leadership pipeline gender spread has increased, including a three-fold increase in the number of women applying for, and being accepted into, senior leadership positions. Similar, though less dramatic, increases have been occurring among people of color. As a result, the company is now preparing leaders in most of the other business lines to focus on unconscious bias in talent management systems throughout the organization. This program has expanded to specifically focus on mitigating unconscious bias in the performance management process, as the organization's leaders want to ensure equity in this critical talent management process.

## CONSCIOUS OR UNCONSCIOUS: GOOD OR BAD?

All of these manifestations of unconscious bias are operating in us and on us all of the time, without our conscious knowledge. Of course, the question still remains: does it really matter if bias is conscious or unconscious? After all, the net effect on the person whom the bias impacts may be the same. It needs to be made clear that it is necessary to develop both an awareness of our own biases and a rigor in addressing these biases. Too often, it is easier to see bias only in others. Fundamentally understanding the automatic nature of bias requires us to adjust the way we approach dealing with these issues, both with others and within ourselves.

Those who work in diversity have all too often traded in the currency of guilt, either feeling bad about ourselves for our biases or trying to make others feel guilty for theirs. In that context, the core driver

of the conversation has often been to find the “bad people” and cure them of their biases. The goal has been to eradicate bias. As we now can see, it is impossible to eliminate bias.

## The goal should be to recognize bias and intervene when and where it interferes with personal, professional, and organizational effectiveness and productivity.

If we believe that it is important to create a just and equitable society and strive to create successful organizations in which everybody can fully contribute and have access to their fair measure of success, it is not consistent for some to people to be discriminated against based on their identification with a particular group. That clearly will not contribute to making smart business decisions, in talent management and other domains. But are the people who feel these biases, those who act this way in all the areas of life...all bad people? Are we bad people? The problem with the good person/bad paradigm is twofold:

- First, it virtually assures that on a collective and individual basis we will never “do diversity right” because every human being has bias of one kind or another.
- Second, it demonstrates a lack of understanding of the reality that bias is as natural to human beings as any function of the mind.

The bottom line is we need it to survive, so we have to work with it.

## THE GOOD NEWS: WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT!

A combination of factors has led us to understand, and experience, that the mind is malleable. We seem to have an enormous capacity for neuroplasticity, which involves subtle changes in neural pathways and synapses, which are due to changes in behavior, environment, and experiences. In other words, the old saying “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks” might not even be true for dogs! There appear to be a number of things that we can do to increase our ability to make more conscious decisions. Regardless of someone’s position in an organization or society at large, everyone can take practical and meaningful steps to reduce the influence of unconscious bias on decision-making. Review the steps listed below, which are designated for either individuals or for people who manage others, and pick two or three that speak to you directly.



- **Perhaps the most important of all is this one: You have bias...yes, you...and so do I.** Biases evolve over the course of our lives based on our experiences and the things and people we are exposed to. However, the notion that we can *make* all bias go away is a fantasy. We all have it. All of us. If we didn’t, we wouldn’t survive. Our brains make decisions, and mistakes, without us even knowing it. The more we try to convince ourselves that we are without bias, the more likely we are to overlook and ignore our own blind spots. The more comfortable we become with the reality

of our biases, the more we move away from the notion that they are traits that only bad people possess. This recognition and awareness helps us develop behaviors that limit the negative impact of bias on our lives and the lives of others. As the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung said, “We cannot change anything until we accept it. Condemnation does not liberate, it oppresses!”

It might be helpful to think about our relationships with biases by using the metaphor of the clutch in a standard transmission vehicle. When a driver steps on the clutch to shift gears the engine never stops running. It doesn’t even slow down. It keeps humming along as it always was. However, what the clutch does is to disable the engine’s ability to move the car. I have found this to be a helpful way to look at bias. We do not have to eliminate it in order to mitigate its impact on our behavior. When we notice it, we have the opportunity to choose our behavior in new ways.

- **Consciously develop the capacity to shine a flashlight on yourself.** There is no clear answer as to how much real capacity we have to develop self-awareness.



However, it is clear that checking in with ourselves and learning to watch ourselves in action can bring patterns to the surface. Do you notice yourself reacting consistently

in particular ways or to particular kinds of people? Do certain things, people, or situations consistently trigger an emotional reaction? These kinds of observations can open up a path of exploration that leads to insight and transformation. Research in mindfulness demonstrates that when we slow ourselves down and exercise self-observation, we are more likely to generate awareness from our prefrontal neo-cortex rather than our more automatic limbic system. Perhaps one of the

reasons that many of our most innovative ideas occur to us when we’re in the shower!

- **Develop and practice constructive uncertainty.** We live in a culture that loves certainty. We are often convinced that the more certainty we feel or see expressed about something, the more likely it is to be true. This is why smart people may be more, rather than less, susceptible to unconscious biases. Our intelligence convinces us that we are right. The more we replace our exclamation points with question marks, the more likely we are to be able to see the irrationality of our decision-making.

By observing ourselves in action, we are more able to thoughtfully consider our perspectives. One way to remind ourselves is by using this simple mnemonic, P.A.U.S.E:

- **Pay attention to what’s actually happening, beneath the judgments and assessments.**
- **Acknowledge your own reactions, interpretations, and judgments.**
- **Understand the other possible reactions, interpretations, and judgments that may be possible.**
- **Search for the most constructive, empowering, or productive way to deal with the situation.**
- **Execute your action plan.**

See the following page for details about the P.A.U.S.E. mnemonic.

- **Explore awkwardness and discomfort.** Our tendency is to back away from situations that make us feel uncomfortable. Since it appears as though our brain’s default mechanism is to assume “danger in the stranger,” we would be well advised to notice those feelings of fear when they occur. Rather than allow our amygdala (the fear or “fight, flight or freeze” center of the brain) to hijack us, we should take some time to more deeply examine what we are reacting to. Who or what is this person reminding us of?

## **P**ay attention to what's actually happening, beneath the judgments and assessments.

When we slow down and look at what's really happening, we have an opportunity to distinguish between an event and our interpretation of that event. For example, say somebody shakes your hand softly. Do you have a visceral reaction and association with weakness as many people in the United States do? ("Limp!" "Cold fish!") What actually happened is that they used less pressure in the handshake than you are used to with most people. The rest is your interpretation.

## **A**cknowledge your own reactions, interpretations, and judgments.

This is where you have an opportunity to identify your interpretation as an interpretation. You might say something to yourself like, "I can see that when he shook my hand softly, I interpreted that as weakness." As soon as you notice an interpretation, as an interpretation, you have moved to a higher level of consciousness.

## **U**nderstand the other possible reactions, interpretations, and judgments that may be possible.

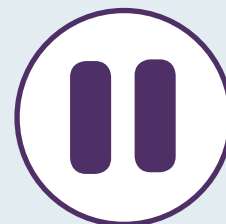
There may be any number of other reasons for the behavior. In the case of the handshake, the person may come from a different culture (a significant percentage of people in different parts of the world shake hands more softly than we do in the United States), or may have an injury, or be recovering from an injury. Or they may have arthritis, or—whatever! Looking at all the possibilities reinforces the dis-identification.

## **S**earch for the most constructive, empowering, or productive way to deal with the situation.

What makes the most sense? Should I assume that the person is weak because of my initial reaction to his handshake, or should I get to know him a little better before I make a definitive assessment? What should I say? What is the best way to handle the circumstance?

## **E**xecute your action plan.

Act consistently with what makes the most sense.





- **Engage with those people you consider “others.”** Because of the nature of our lives, we often find ourselves living with, working with, and relating to people inside a relatively limited bandwidth of human difference. Consciously expanding that bandwidth can give us a broader perspective about people who are different from us. The United States is a more diverse country in 2013 than it was in 2007, and far more diverse than it was in 1997. The diversity of people is increasing, competing for jobs within a tight marketplace and yet, it is imperative that we find ways to engage with those who are different from us in positive ways. Remember that every one of us is an “other” to someone else.



## The more we know people for who they are, the less we treat them as what they are.

- **Reframe the conversation to focus on equitable treatment, respect, and good decision-making, and away from only discrimination and “protected classes.”** Review every aspect of the employment life cycle for patterns of hidden bias—screening résumés, interviews, onboarding (bringing new employees on board), assignment processes, mentoring and sponsorship, performance evaluation, identifying high performers, promotion and termination.

Emphasizing the universality of bias allows people to interrelate from a sense of commonality rather than difference. It builds on the human tendency towards homophily, the “love of same,” which leads us to feel more comfortable with people like ourselves.

- **Get feedback and data.** It is almost impossible to rationally look at our own patterns of bias. However, we can review our behavior. Gathering data and getting feedback can be very helpful in determining whether or not there are any patterns of bias in our behavior toward others. If the data show a potential pattern, it should at least be an invitation to look and see whether there is some bias at play. You may want to initiate a résumé study within your industry, organization or department to see whether those with roughly the equivalent education and experience are weighted equally relative to names, race, culture, etc. Conduct an assessment of your organizational unconscious to understand what issues of bias might exist in your workplace. Interviews and surveys with present and former employees also can be helpful in this process. Once people are outside of the culture they often are able to offer valuable insight.
- **Offer customized unconscious bias education based on the needs of different areas in the organization.** When it comes to training and awareness, one size does not fit all. Different functional areas have different cultures, needs, and requirements. In several client engagements Cook Ross has undertaken within the past few years, we have customized approaches to address the specific needs, sometimes even focusing on the specific vocabulary of recruiters, engineers, sales people, marketers, or executive leaders. We also have developed education programs to recalibrate structures for job interviews, performance reviews, and talent assignments/team selection.
- **Support activities that encourage positive images and experiences of members of non-dominant groups.** Research shows that

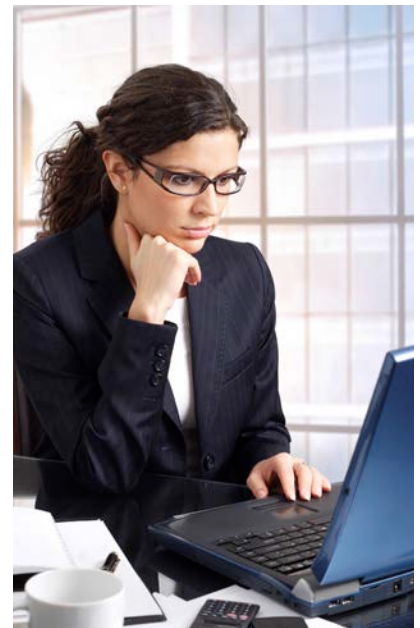


images, posters, newsletters, annual reports, speaker series, podcasts and other exposure can insert positive messaging that can serve to counter negative stereotyping when they are coupled with a genuine attempt to observe behavior and change it. In fact, “positive stereotyping” of this kind has been found to be among the most effective systemic interventions to address patterns of unconscious bias.

- **Reduce guilt and increase responsibility.** While the aversive emotional feeling associated with guilt may discourage an individual from performing a guilt-provoking (and presumably socially undesirable) act in the future, as a long-term strategy is a non-functional reaction. Guilt is what people feel because of what they have done. Responsibility represents an understanding of our impact on others and our commitment to change. When people feel guilty they generally react in one of two ways: by contracting or by feeling bad about themselves. Guilt and shame can make us react to, or get angry at, the source of our guilt. This is altogether unproductive. When we take responsibility, we are able to move forward to correct our mistakes.
- **Develop structures and systems that remove identifiers that might stimulate bias.** Removing names, pictures or other qualifiers can often create a greater sense of equity and inclusion in decision-making.

For example, in the 1970s approximately ten percent of orchestra members were women. As a way to counter-balance this trend, blind auditions were widely developed in which the musician auditioned behind a screen and even walked in on a carpet to mask the sound of high heels.<sup>17</sup> By the mid-1990s, the percentage of women musicians had risen to 35%.

- **Make it a cultural thing.** This may be the most important of all. It is very difficult for an individual to tackle his or her own unconscious biases. If we create an organizational community of consciousness in which people collectively commit to support each other in addressing bias, we are far more likely to have dynamics that we are unaware of brought to our attention. Create environments where different views are welcomed. Build integrated teams and create policies that require colleagues to treat each other with respect and professionalism, not political correctness. In our experience this may be the most impactful result from unconscious bias training when it is done well. It opens up a new, more constructive way to engage in dialogue around issues that we sometimes struggle to talk about.



So far we have been mainly focusing on the ways that individuals can manage their own biases. Now let’s look at some ways to build consciousness into the talent management process.

<sup>17</sup> Claudia Godlin and Cecilia Rouse, *Orchestrating Impartiality: The Impact of “Blind” Auditions on Female Musicians*, *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 90, No. 4. (September 2000), pp.715-741.

## PRACTICAL STEPS IN THE HUMAN CAPITAL LIFECYCLE

By broadly including people in task groups, they can begin to see themselves as part of a larger, interdependent community in which everyone has skills and equitable opportunities to contribute. Together, as an organizational community, we can look at systems and structures that support better decision-making in areas like recruitment, bringing people on board, assessment and development. Structure creates behavior in organizations and the right structures can encourage more inclusive behaviors.

What are some of the specific behavior that can contribute to more conscious people management? Consider these ideas:

### RECRUITMENT

- Note and evaluate your “first impressions.”
- Do you notice an immediate like or dislike of the candidate?
- Do you have anchoring biases about experiences, schools, and personal preferences?
- Avoid distractions or “speed conversations” when talking with potential recruits. Short interactions tend to strongly favor people in dominant groups.
- Attempt to get a deeper understanding of the recruits’ background and the path they took in getting to your door. Non-traditional paths may not show up in traditional ways.
- Make yourself available, both logistically and interpersonally to get a better sense of the potential recruit. Share a personal story. Let them get a better sense of you.
- Track your results for patterns that might reveal biases, including unconscious bias.

### ONBOARDING

- Provide cultural, as well as logistic orientation. We often underestimate how important it is to help new employees (especially people from non-dominant

groups) understand the organizational culture and how to successfully navigate it.

- Watch out for early assumptions about a person’s performance. Some people are slower starters than others but they soon catch up and even move ahead of those who seem to be quick learners.
- Make time to personally connect with associates.
- Make yourself available, when possible, to check and see how they’re doing.
- Be systemic, rather than intuitive, in providing opportunities for new associates. Keep track of job assignments and other similar opportunities. Be sure all new associates have multiple opportunities to succeed.

### ASSESSMENT

- Make sure there are well-articulated expectations for behaviors and results that can be clearly monitored.
- Use data to balance your “gut” reactions.
- Watch for patterns of assessment among particular groups. Do certain groups tend to receive lower ratings than others?
- Get broad input from different people about an employee. One way to diminish the power of unconscious bias is to include more voices and perspectives in the process of collecting input.
- Be sure you are measuring against “success” rather than your own personal ways of doing things. We are often



unconsciously dismissive of other ways of doing things, not because they are less successful, but because they are not our ways.

- Create a mentorship or sponsorship relationship. Relationships like these not only benefit the protégé, but the mentor or sponsor as well.

## DEVELOPMENT

- Expose employees to a broad range of educational and developmental opportunities.
- Create a career development process for your associates, including:
  - Job assignment strategies
  - Clear performance objectives
  - Regular feedback opportunities
  - Ongoing opportunities for growth and development
- Be aware that unstructured processes will tend to benefit the dominant group. Structure allows us to be sure that all employees have opportunities to grow and be successful.
- Monitor your own patterns in assigning tasks. It is easy to slip into patterns that benefit some employees to the exclusion of others.
- Encourage employees to take responsibility for their own development.

## CONCLUSION

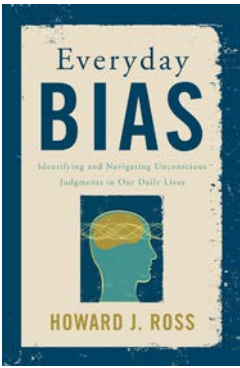
Unconscious patterns have an enormous impact on both our individual behavior and on organizational behavior. Only when we find the courage and curiosity to engage in a seemingly contradictory path – consciously becoming aware of and addressing something that is, by nature, concealed – can we begin to see more clearly into our blind spots. As Viktor Frankl wrote:

“Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space lies our freedom and power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and freedom.”<sup>18</sup>

Awareness and growth does not happen overnight. Increasing our diversity, inclusiveness, and cultural competency requires us to undertake a long journey of continuously challenging our perceptions and slowing down our impulse to judge instantaneously and reactively. This means we must continually confront unconscious bias. Ultimately, the result will be more conscious, inclusive and humane organizations with greater opportunity for all, more engaged individuals and higher profitability. Isn't that worth the effort?

---

<sup>18</sup> Frankl, Victor, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1959.

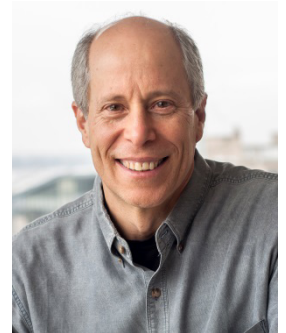


To learn more about unconscious bias and how to address it in your life and organization, check out *Everyday Bias: Identifying and Navigating Unconscious Judgments in Our Daily Lives*, by Howard J. Ross, Published by Rowman and Littlefield, 2014 available at [www.cookross.com](http://www.cookross.com) or [amazon.com](http://amazon.com).

Order now: [www.cookross.com](http://www.cookross.com) | 301.565.4035

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Founder & Chief Learning Officer at Cook Ross Inc., a visionary at heart, **Howard Ross** has served more than 25 years as an influential business consultant to hundreds of organizations across the United States and in 21 other countries, specializing in leadership, diversity, and organizational transformation. As a recognized thought leader, Howard brings invaluable expertise and knowledge on the topic of exploring, revealing and addressing Unconscious Bias. He is the architect of several award-winning training and awareness programs, notably CultureVision and The Diversity Toolkit. He is also the author of *ReInventing Diversity: Transforming Organizational Community to Strengthen People, Purpose & Performance*, published by Rowman Littlefield in association with the Society for Human Resource Management. Howard was the 2007-2008 Johnnetta B. Cole Professor of Diversity-in-Residence at Bennett College for Women, the first time a white man has ever served in such a position at an HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities). He is a frequently invited international speaker for organizations and at diversity and inclusion conferences. Howard can be heard monthly on NPR, as a regular guest on The Kojo Nnamdi Show.



## ABOUT COOK ROSS INC.

Cook Ross has over twenty four years of experience in providing an innovative approach to diversity, inclusion, cultural competency, and leadership development through training and consulting products and services. Cook Ross is considered to be a thought leader in the practical application of academic research of the unconscious to organizational diversity & inclusion efforts. For more information, contact us at [lookingforanswers@cookross.com](mailto:lookingforanswers@cookross.com).



(301) 565-4035 phone

(301) 565-3952 fax

[www.cookross.com](http://www.cookross.com)

[lookingforanswers@cookross.com](mailto:lookingforanswers@cookross.com)