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# The Unconscious Bias Trap: How Misconceptions About Unconscious Bias Can Trip Up Any Business

Bob Murray\*

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Research has shown that we all have a number of biases, most of which we are not aware of. Most commonly these are in favor of one thing or group of people, or against something or a group of people. It is also true that these biases can be a great hindrance to any organization that wants to create a more diverse workplace. The prevailing idea has been that these biases are essentially assumptions that have been lodged in the brain through experience. Therefore, it has been thought, all that you needed to do to eliminate these assumptions is to show people that they do in fact have them and to “reframe” their thoughts so as to eliminate them. However, new research has shown that many of these biases are genetic in origin and cannot be changed in this way. In fact most of this “unconscious bias” training is counterproductive when dealing with genetically based assumptions and beliefs. I look at the latest scientific thought about unconscious bias and suggest new approaches which will make it easier to deal with.

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**N**ot long ago, I was working with the senior leadership of a major high-tech corporation, which I shall call AllTech (not its real name). I had been brought in to create a better leadership structure and as an executive coach for the CEO and a number of other top executives.

One of the problems that the organization had was that it was regarded as extremely “blocky” and the women in the business

complained frequently to HR and others of really inappropriate behavior towards them. This included touching, snide remarks and insinuations that promotion would be helped through sexual favors.

The HR Director brought in an expert in “unconscious bias” who proceeded to put all of the male employees through an awareness course. I sat in on several of these. The consultant proceeded to demonstrate very

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\* Dr Bob Murray is a prize-winning scientist, a noted psychologist and cofounder of the international consultancy Fortinberry Murray. With his partner Dr Alicia Fortinberry is the author of 11 books, the most recent being “Leading the Future: The Human Science of Law Firm Leadership and Strategy” (Ark Publications). He appears frequently in TV talk shows and is quoted in such publications as “The New York Times” and the “Sydney Morning Herald.” He is an in-demand speaker at many conferences throughout the world. He can be contacted through the website [www.fortinberrymurray.com](http://www.fortinberrymurray.com)

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effectively that we all had unconscious biases, and made a number of us feel very guilty about having the assumptions we had, the stereotypes that we related to and for thinking the thoughts that we did.

I later asked women in the firm, and the HR Director herself, what had been the overall effect of the unconscious bias program. “None,” they all said. The behaviors had not materially changed in any way. Rather than being in the open, they had become more covert and the women felt that they were on shakier ground by complaining about them.

One of the most fashionable ideas at the moment is that businesses large and small must strive to counter “unconscious bias”—stereotypes a person is unaware of adhering to regarding race, gender, religion, ethnicity and so forth. The aim is highly laudable. People should not behave towards others in ways that insult, offend, degrade or alienate them, and it is the job of management to make sure that none of these behaviors happen.

The trouble is that many popular remedies for biases that we are not aware of—or even biases that we are aware of—are ineffective in the long term and many of them only cement the thoughts, assumptions and emotions that they are trying to get rid of in the first place.

This is what I call the “bias trap.” Managers can fall into it so very easily simply by employing strategies which may look good on paper and which may seem obvious and in line with most accepted assumptions, but which are not based on real science.

In this article I want to:

- Look at the scientific roots of unconscious bias.

- Point out the fallacies in many approaches.
- Suggest some ways in which we can correct for biases—hidden and overt—which not only have been shown to work, but which can lead to really positive change.

## The Science

As a scientist (as well as a psychologist and consultant) I always think that the best place to start any discussion is with the science. I do not think for a moment that giving people the facts will change their way of looking at anything (the human system does not work that way, just look at the Brexit result), but at least I can lay bare the research base I am coming from.

Firstly, let me make a statement which might seem obvious: I have biases, many of them hidden even from me, and so do you. And thank goodness for many of them, they help us make the kinds of unthinking snap decisions that enable success in business, survival on the savannah, keeping alive on a building site and much more.

Many others are, of course, less desirable. Many of these are fixed in our minds because they made sense many millennia ago.

The evolutionary reason for unconscious bias is primarily to keep us safe from predators, human and otherwise. A secondary purpose is to prevent sudden change. The biggest single unconscious bias that we all share is a bias against change. Change goes through the same neural pathways in the brain as social rejection or other relational loss<sup>1</sup>, so we are biased in favor of the present order. This is why people

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<sup>1</sup> L Koban *et al.* (2014), “Separate Neural Representations for Physical Pain and Social Rejection”, *Nature Communications*, Vol. 5.

often resist doing things differently even when it would seem to be in their interest to adopt a new behavior or approach.

The prevailing theories of “unconscious bias” assume that prejudice against people of other genders, ethnicities, religions or sexual orientations to ourselves is learned and can therefore be unlearned. They say that the biases we have in these areas are the result of the parenting we had, the social and other norms of the cultures we live in, our other particular life experiences or our social background. Indeed many of the unthinking ways we treat other people, or the thoughts we have about them, are a result of this conditioning. In the words of the song from the Rogers and Hammerstein musical *South Pacific* “You’ve got to be taught to hate and fear. You’ve got to be taught from year to year....” Of course to a large extent the lyricist got it right. We do adopt habitual behaviors and thought patterns as coping mechanisms to deal with the situations we found ourselves in, in our youth—which include our parental and social attitudes.

Those actions which are learned and habitualized through constant unthinking practice can be changed.

To cite a trivial example, learned habit is why people who live in China hand out business cards using two hands, whereas in the US or Europe people do it with one hand. There is no evolutionary or neurogenetically good reason for doing it either way. Doing it the European way will be awkward at first for a Chinese businessperson (like all new behaviors) but he or she will soon adapt, and

vice versa. I have done business in China regularly for the last ten years and the two-handed approach is now my norm. This is learned behavior. However we tend to think, without realizing it, that the way we do it is “right” and the way the others do it is “wrong,” that there’s something “odd” and “different” about the people who do it in another way. We can therefore even be unconsciously biased in the way we hand out business cards.

But there are some behaviors and thought patterns which are so pervasive that they seem to transcend cultural, ethnic and experiential differences and recently a good deal of research has been devoted to these. What we have found is rather surprising.

We have just now discovered that a lot of what we assumed was learned in this area is in fact genetic. A recently published study has proven beyond any reasonable doubt that the generally held assumption that men were more suited to science and women to the humanities is in fact of genetic origin—hard wired into us.<sup>2</sup> The researchers recruited a total of 304 pairs of twins—equal numbers of identical and nonidentical twins—to test the assumption. Most of the twin pairs had different life experiences and conditioning. They were tested for both their implicit (unstated) and explicit (stated) gender stereotyping. The results were clear: environmental/conditioning factors played very little part in the stereotyping; instead it was highly heritable.

The stereotype may have nothing to do with today’s facts. In fact the genetics behind this widely-held assumption were put in place

<sup>2</sup> Huajian Cai *et al.* (2016), “Male = Science, Female = Humanities Both Implicit and Explicit Gender-Science Stereotypes Are Heritable”, *Social Psychological & Personality Science*, Vol. 7, No. 5, pp. 412-419.

hundreds of thousands of years ago<sup>3</sup>. Of course it is a fact that there are magnificent female scientists, engineers and mathematicians and equally there are men who excel in the humanities. But the fact also remains that facts do not necessarily change biological (or even learned) predispositions.

Biases in other areas may also be genetic. For example, the general reluctance to sell a losing stock or give up on a failing business rather than pour more cash into it to rescue it (throwing good money after bad) may be built into our DNA.<sup>4</sup>

As with everything genetic, we are playing a numbers game here. While men generally are taller than women, there are plenty of men who are shorter than the average woman. Women generally live longer than men, yet there are lots of women who have died an early death. Likewise, not everyone will share the same stereotypes or act on them.

Like all genetically-based predispositions, stereotyping played a vital role in our evolutionary self-protection. It enabled us to respond quickly to situations which in the distant past could be dangerous. For example, the average woman is physically weaker and runs more slowly than the average man. Preventing her from going on the hunt—which was a very dangerous occupation—meant that the hunting band could move faster and stay safer. It was also important for our evolutionary survival to keep women safe and

thus able to breed and nourish the next generation. In the traditional hunter-gather bands, there were always fewer men than women.<sup>5</sup> Over time—millions of years—this predominantly male hunting stereotype became embedded in our genes and shows up today in all sorts of fields though very, very tangentially related to hunting prey on the African savannah.

When these biases translate into business, it becomes an easy way to consciously or unconsciously exclude others. This can make us feel more comfortable and to reserve the best jobs for ourselves. As jobs become scarcer and competition for them becomes more fierce, this bias will become even more evident since it ties in with our other great genetically-based instinct: self-protection.

It is only by examining our own behavior that we can tell what hidden biases we have, but research has shown that, no matter how free of bias we think we are, we are still to some extent governed by our biological predispositions to bias in one way or another.<sup>6</sup>

### **Why is all This Important?**

This matters because much of the way that “unconscious bias” is handled in businesses and other organizations is based on the idea that people think the way that they do because they have not been shown the error of their cognitive ways. The reasoning is that they only need to be shown that they exhibit negative biases and that once they have seen

<sup>3</sup> Gustavo Politis *et al.* (2011), “Gender, Power and Mobility among the Awa-Guaga”, *Journal of Anthropological Research*, Vol. 67, No. 2, pp. 189-211.

<sup>4</sup> H Cronqvist and S Siegel (2014), “The Genetics of Investment Biases”, *Journal of Financial Economics*, Vol. 113, No. 2, pp. 215-234.

<sup>5</sup> N B Jones (2016), *Demography and Evolutionary Ecology of Hadza Hunter-Gatherers*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

<sup>6</sup> W J Van der Steen (1998), “Bias in Behaviour Genetics: An Ecological Perspective”, *Acta Biotheoretica*, Vol. 46, No. 4, pp. 369-377.

the light they will change their mindset. This was the basis of the course that I attended at AllTech.

I do not think that this is a valid way to change any mindset, but it is a particularly bad way to deal with biologically, culturally or experientially based predispositions. Even if the bias is non-genetic when you set out to demonstrate that someone is thinking “wrong” thoughts you may be challenging one of the central cores of their personality and they will react by defending their “ego.”<sup>7</sup> They may pay lip service to what you say, but you have changed nothing. You may even, perhaps, have strengthened the original thought.

If the assumptions are learned, you can change the way a person views the world using nonmaterial relational rewards over a period of about 18 months or so.<sup>8</sup>

However if a person’s genetics are involved, then no amount of this kind of reward-stimulus will actually effect a change. If you are biologically programmed to think in a particular way, you will probably continue to do so no matter what. But someone on the outside attempting to change the way a person’s genes express themselves can do a lot of damage.

In either case, the attempt to persuade or shame a person out of a biologically based bias—conscious or unconscious—will result in them seeing you (if you are the one trying

to do the persuading) or even the company you both work for, as the enemy and you will be treated as such.

### **So How do You Counter “Unconscious Bias?”**

First I would like to look at what you should not do to counter unconscious bias. From what I have said already, it should be obvious that there are a number of things that you should not do to try to eradicate it, whether it takes the form of learned attitudes or genetic propensities. There are also a few other commonly applied “solutions” to the problem of bias which are self-defeating at best. All these things can be summarized as an inventory of three “Thou shalt nots:”

1. *Thou shalt not tell people that they’re wrong to feel a certain way.* Telling people that what they are feeling or thinking is wrong, can cause them to see you as the enemy and reinforce the very behaviors and attitudes you are trying to eradicate. The problem is that everybody thinks that they are right, and they can see any denial of that as a personal assault.<sup>9</sup> It can trigger what is known as an amygdala hijack making the brain feel that it is under attack. This is particularly true if the bias is genetically based.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Sung-Pil Kang *et al.* (2004), “Measuring Mindset Change in the Systemic Transformation of Education”, *Association for Educational Communications and Technology Paper*, October.

<sup>8</sup> IA James and S Barton (2004), “Changing Core Beliefs With the Continuum Technique”, *Behavioral and Cognitive Psychotherapy*, Vol. 32, No. 4, pp. 431-442.

<sup>9</sup> WC Pamerleau (2013), “Why Everyone Thinks They’re Right”, *Social Philosophy Today*, Vol. 29, pp. 121-134.

<sup>10</sup> Ben Dattner and Darren Dahl (2012), *The Blame Game: How the Hidden Rules of Credit and Blame Determine Our Success or Failure*, Simon & Schuster, NY.

2. *Thou shalt not “celebrate difference.”* “Celebrating difference” can also have a very negative effect. People are highly disposed to trust and to collaborate with those that they recognize as part of their tribe. Emphasizing difference can actually reinforce the “otherness” of the people that the unconscious bias is aimed at.<sup>11</sup>

3. *Thou shalt not try to change people’s mindset through guilt.* Using guilt to try and shame people into a change of attitude or behavior was, until very recently viewed as a positive way to get people to change behavior and attitudes. More recent research has shown quite the opposite. What it does lead to is hiding (trying to cover up bad behaviors), escape (ignoring one’s own lapses as if they were of no consequence) and general avoidance of the issue.<sup>12</sup>

So what does work? The main thing to remember is that “unconscious bias” in the biological or learned sense of the word cannot be quickly or easily changed. Therefore with a lot of stereotyping, probably nothing can be done in the context of “an unconscious bias program” to change the mindset of those who are biased.

What can be done is to change behavior. Fortunately for the average entrepreneur this is much more easily accomplished in a small-to-medium sized organization than in a large

one.<sup>13</sup> There are four things that can be done to eradicate the appearance of unconscious bias—and thus its harmful effects—no matter how it originated.

1. Decide what behaviors you want to observe within the organization. In the work of my colleagues and from the work I have done in this area, we have found that this is the most vital part of the change exercise. Ask yourself: What would it look like if people were not biased? What would they do differently? Then, in conjunction with the workforce, work out a list of desired actions (or inactions) that people should adopt to show a lack of bias. These become a kind of contract between all the employees.

To be honest, in terms of bias, it is not what people think that matters so much, rather how they behave. Once the behaviors have been decided then it is up to management to make sure that they are adhered to—they become the ticket of entry into the workplace tribe and the rules which allow a person to stay a member of it.

2. Focus on commonality. Concentrate on emphasizing what people that work in the business have in common with each other. The more commonality, there is the more chance of trust being there and thus there will be less conflict.<sup>14</sup> Management must

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<sup>11</sup> Murray B and Fortinberry (2016), *Leading the Future*, Ark Publications, London.

<sup>12</sup> D Randles and J L Tracy (2013), “Nonverbal Displays of Shame Predict Relapse and Declining Health in Recovering Alcoholics”, *Clinical Psychological Science*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 149-155.

<sup>13</sup> Arne L Kalleberg and Kevin T Leicht (1991), “Gender and Organizational Performance: Determinants of Small Business Survival and Success”, *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 34, No. 1, pp. 136-161.

<sup>14</sup> J Lindsay (2007), “Intercultural Expectations: I La Galigo in Singapore”, *TDR*, Vol. 51, No. 2, pp. 60-75.

constantly stress commonalities and encourage staff members to discover things that they share.

3. Give people ample chance to socialize with each other. Socializing, alone will never get rid of bias, but it will help. On social occasions, people tend to explore commonalities—films they both like, teams they both support, shops they both frequent, sites they both visit.
4. Create a culture that respectfully questions all assumptions and generalizations whether these indicate bias or not. Research

has shown that most of our assumptions are wrong, and a culture of questioning one's own and other people's assumptions can lessen bias and improve productivity.

I realize that this approach is different from many of those that have been used before. However, since it is based on the science of how humans actually work—as opposed to how we wish they did—there is a much better chance of a favorable outcome. ☺

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