

## 4.3: Combating Bias

### What you'll learn to do: Discuss strategies for creating a functional workplace by combating biases

Our perceptions and resulting judgments are prone to error, and the associated terms are often used without a clear understanding of the distinctions between and significance of a particular term.

Understanding both the errors and the terminology creates an awareness that is a step toward creating a shared and inclusive view of reality—and possibility—in the workplace.



#### Learning Outcomes

- Describe the differences between stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination
- Discuss the impact bias might have on communication in the workplace

### Stereotypes, Prejudice, and Discrimination

Social perception is relative, reflecting both positive and negative impressions of people based on a range of factors. Our perceptions of people help to allow us to make decisions and snap judgments, but can also lead to biased or stereotyped conclusions. Although often used interchangeably, the terms used to describe these perception errors—stereotype, prejudice and discrimination—have different meanings and connotations.

**Stereotypes** are oversimplified generalizations about groups of people; stereotypes can be based on race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation—almost any characteristic. They may be positive (usually when referencing one's own group, such as when women suggest they have better soft skills), but are often negative (usually toward other groups, such as when members of a dominant racial group suggest that a minority racial group is dangerous or stupid).



In either case, the stereotype is a generalization that doesn't take individual differences into account. As novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explains in a TED Global talk titled "[The Danger of a Single Story](#)," the problem of stereotypes is not that they are wrong, but they are incomplete. Adichie is a storyteller par excellence; with good humor and keen observation, her talk raises our awareness of everyday errors and is a powerful antidote to stereotypes.

**Prejudice** refers to the beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and attitudes someone holds about a group. A prejudice is not based on one's experiences; instead, it is a prejudgment, originating outside actual experience. In the 1970 documentary [Eye of the Storm](#), Jane Elliott illustrates the way in which prejudice develops. The documentary shows how defining one category of people as superior (in this case, children with blue eyes) results in prejudice against people who are not part of the favored category.

While prejudice refers to biased thinking, **discrimination** consists of actions against a group of people. Discrimination can be based on age, race, religion, health, and other indicators. Discrimination can take many forms, from unfair housing practices to biased hiring systems. [Equal Employment Opportunity](#) legislation and enforcement by the EEOC is an attempt to prevent discrimination in the workplace. However, we can't erase discrimination from our culture just by passing laws to abolish it. As

alluded to in the discussion of race, discrimination is a complex issue that relates to educational, economic, legal, and political systems in our society.

Prejudice and discrimination can overlap and intersect. One area of particular opportunity is raising awareness of unconscious bias. In a *Fast Company* article titled “**How Unconscious Bias Affects Everything You Do,**” author Howard Ross relays a classic example of how major orchestras overcame systemic hiring bias to achieve relative gender equity. Although there were a number of contributing factors (for example, advertising auditions rather than relying on invitations only) the critical factor was implementing blind auditions where raters did not see the musicians. The critical aspect of this example is that the bias wasn’t overcome until auditioners were asked to remove their shoes before entering the audition area. Prior to that, raters were still influenced in their judgement by the sound of a person’s shoes (i.e., the sound of either heels or flat shoes led the raters to make a judgement about the gender of the auditioner).

Unconscious bias isn’t limited to a particular industry or gender. Ross notes that “Over 1,000 studies in the past 10 years alone have conclusively shown that if you’re human, you have bias, and that it impacts almost every variation of human identity: Race, gender, sexual orientation, body size, religion, accent, height, hand dominance, etc.” The conclusion: “The question is not ‘do we have bias?’ but rather ‘which are ours?’”

### try it

You’re thinking through the implications of different terms used to refer to perception errors. Which one of the following is an action that equal employment opportunity legislation was enacted to address?

- stereotyping
- prejudice
- discrimination

### Answer

discrimination

## Bias in the Workplace

When thinking about diversity in the workplace, chances are, most individuals tend to see themselves as good-intentioned, egalitarian, and fair-minded people. They certainly do not go out of their way to denigrate others. However, believing yourself to be “good” simply because you’re not actively engaging in hateful behavior is an overly simplistic and, ultimately, unaware viewpoint because everyone has unconscious bias of some kind. The steps individuals take (or don’t take!) to recognize and combat these unconscious biases has a direct impact on the workplace and everyday life.

It is important to be aware of how biases can affect individuals’ behavior. While there are laws and regulations designed to protect against explicit and extreme bias (e.g., not hiring someone because of their race, gender, ability, or age), there are also instances when seemingly “small” things individuals say or do in the workplace can leave a long-lasting impression in employees’ minds.



### Practice Question

During a team-building event, Lorenzo tells his coworker Caitlin about an uncomfortable experience he and his brother had the other day where they were singled out because of their Latino heritage. Caitlin responds, “That’s awful! As a woman, I know exactly how that feels.” Lorenzo seems uncomfortable with her response and moves the conversation to a different topic. What do you think happened here?

Write your essay response here:

### Answer

Despite the fact that Caitlin was trying to empathize, this response likely made Lorenzo feel like she had missed the point of his story. While Caitlin may have experienced discrimination in her life as a white woman, her experiences have been very different from Lorenzo's, a Latino man. Her empathy would likely have been better expressed if she had said something that acknowledged his unique experience while also recognizing her own membership of a group that has social majority over his. Members of marginalized groups often forget that they can exhibit prejudiced lines of thinking against groups they do not belong to.

Such “small” things are known as microaggressions or microinvalidations: daily forms of taken-for-granted bias and discrimination that have a real effect on people’s lives. The work of anti-racism and anti-discrimination is the ongoing struggle to recognize and respond to this situation.

- Microaggressions are brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership.
- Microinvalidations are characterized by communications or environmental cues that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of certain groups.

### watch this

Watch this video to see some examples of everyday microaggressions and microinvalidations. This video comes from Derald Wing Sue, Professor of Psychology and Education at Columbia University, and his book titled *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender and Sexual Orientation*.



This video illustrates examples of microaggressions that real people have experienced. After watching this video, you may have realized you have experienced one or more of these examples. These small slights aren’t just “in your head,” and it can feel like a relief that there is a term for this experience. Microaggressions are, by nature, hurtful and boundary-crossing. The statements and nonverbal communication from the video make an assumption about the history, identity, body, or community of the person holding the sign. A microaggression might also be distressing to another person in the room who may be overhearing the remark.

If you are the target of, or observe, a microaggression, you are not responsible for solving the problem unless you wish to take on that responsibility. But actions you might take to help management and other employees take responsibility could include:

- Having a private conversation with a friend, team lead, or other manager about how to bring a problematic or hurtful dynamic up with the individual expressing the microaggression.

- Describing to your superior what happened and asking to talk about it at a meeting or in a memo.
- If you are a bystander, you might talk to the team lead or manager. You might also take the person who committed the microaggression aside privately and share your perspective on what you saw and heard. Ask them how what they wanted to say could have been conveyed differently and more effectively. Encourage them to apologize if it is appropriate.

Our differences from each other are important and worth addressing because they allow us to deepen our conversations and share perspectives that may vary according to our national, racial, gender, or class identity. Very often, a microaggression is seen by the perpetrator as a compliment, a statement about someone not in the room, or as an expression of desire to be more familiar than the actual relationship with the person would support. Most importantly, a microaggression, because it reflects a biased attitude towards a whole group, may make it more difficult for members of that group to learn, be in the classroom space, or speak their minds. Reducing or eliminating microaggressions, and responding appropriately when one occurs, is everyone's responsibility, and we can do it while still preserving academic freedom and insisting on everyone's right to speak openly and frankly. On the other hand, we shouldn't be afraid to talk to each other, and even prior to friendship, we want to understand where people are coming from.

### what can i do?

If microaggressions are, as the definition says, often unintentional, can we be intentional and reduce them? Here are some things to keep in mind that might shape our intentions:

- Don't assume you know anything about a person, what they think or what they know, by what you see on the surface.
- You are not entitled to comment on a person's appearance, body, or presumed identity, unless your opinion is solicited.
- Wait for an invitation to ask a personal question, and remember that some people might classify a question as personal that you would be happy to answer yourself. If you want to be productively curious, disclose something about yourself and see if the person reciprocates. If not, let it go.
- Touching people presumes familiarity and should be preceded by an invitation to be touched. Compliment someone's fashion sense, or ask them where they get their hair cut if you need a haircut, but keep your hands to yourself.
- At work, be specific in your observations about social differences, preferably with evidence drawn from the current workforce at your work location. Make sure you are expressing an informed opinion, not a misinformed opinion.

### Impact of Bias in the Workplace

Given that we all have perception errors, what's the impact of these errors on communication in the workplace? Unchecked, bias creates language, policies, operating procedures, and myriad other communications that inhibit the development of an inclusive culture. In an article titled "**Perception Is Reality When It Comes to Women in the Workforce**," the author cites a study showing that language (in this case, the gender interpretation of names) can also lead to discrimination and that discrimination can be perpetrated by both men and women.

For a best practices regarding diversity and inclusion, understanding and mitigating the impact of unconscious bias is now considered an essential twenty-first century leadership skill. To help develop this skill, Catalyst, a research and women's equity advocacy organization, has teamed with massive open online course (MOOC) provider edX to deliver a free, self-paced training: **Unconscious Bias: From Awareness to Action**.

### Practice Question

You've been tapped to create a workshop about bias in the workplace. Which of the following is the key point you want your participants to take away?

- Perceived bias reflects factual differences.
- Perception is reality, until you change it.
- Perception is reality.

### Answer

Perception is reality, until you change it.