

# SEVEN MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

---

Unconscious biases are, well, **UNCONSCIOUS**, which makes them hard to even recognize, much less identify their true impact. It's a complex and sometimes controversial issue. Is it any wonder that there are so many misconceptions around **WHAT TO DO?** Before you can take steps to operate more fairly and effectively as a school leader, you need to get your bearings.

## MISCONCEPTION #1

# MOST UNCONSCIOUS BIAS IS AROUND **GENDER AND RACE**

---

There may be visible school or district-wide efforts to counter bias around gender and race to promote equity.

However, gender and race are far from the whole landscape. We also have biases based on job function, age/generation (e.g., Millennials), socioeconomic status, family/domestic status (e.g., married,

parent), nationality, language ability, veteran status, culture, sexuality, weight, height, physical ability, attractiveness, political affiliation, level of education, religion, hair color, and even seemingly mundane characteristics, like how messy someone's desk is or how powerful they look in their chair.

This doesn't mean you can possibly monitor every thought and action for bias against every kind of person. Instead, you can revisit the overall fairness of your procedures and decision-making on a regular basis (maybe once every quarter or six months), helping build a more inclusive culture.

## MISCONCEPTION #2

# BIAS IS ALL ABOUT **DISLIKING** CERTAIN GROUPS

---

Bias is often about unintentionally favoring certain groups, regardless of whether they're more deserving. Often, these groups are the ones we belong to or are favored by society. To surface your biases, you need to examine whom you might be biased toward (i.e., inclined to favor), not just whom you might be biased against (i.e., inclined to overlook, avoid, or harm).

Which groups might you unknowingly be favoring? Even considering this question can help you check your assumptions, as

can meeting or working with people from groups that are different than your own.



---

To surface your biases, you need to **EXAMINE** whom you might be biased **TOWARD**, not just whom you might be biased **AGAINST**.

---

Consider an educator's day-to-day instructional practice. Even when teachers believe they are dividing their time and attention equitably among genders, research shows that teachers are more likely to call male students up to the front of the class to demonstrate, and more likely to direct their gaze toward male students while asking open-ended questions. Becoming aware of unconscious tendencies like these and putting systems in place to address it are critical ways that educators can create more equitable classrooms.

## MISCONCEPTION #3

# I CAN'T **DO ANYTHING** ABOUT MY UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

If you care about how bias affects you and the people around you, then you're already on your way. Researchers find that one of the best predictors of whether people can reduce their biases is simply whether they have the desire to. Here are additional ways to overcome your biases:

- **LEARN MORE ABOUT YOUR COLLEAGUES, STUDENTS, AND FAMILIES IN YOUR SCHOOL COMMUNITY**

Unconscious biases often result from your brain taking shortcuts based on what it assumes to be true. So there is perhaps no better way to

challenge biases than by learning more about the individuals you work with and different kinds of people in general. Take time to gauge people's true interests and ambitions, and intentionally build relationships with students and adults whose backgrounds differ from yours.

- **CREATE FAIR-MINDED PROCESSES FOR THINGS YOU TEND TO DO OFF-THE-CUFF.**

Rather than impromptu delegation, determine who's really best for the task. Be mindful of giving the right amount and type of feedback to staff and students.

- **TEAM UP TO DISRUPT BIAS-PRONE EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES.**

As an example, you could work with other equity-minded school leaders to recruit diverse teaching candidates or explore best practices to cultivate a culture of inclusive instruction.



One of the best predictors of whether people can reduce their biases is simply whether they have **THE DESIRE** to.



## MISCONCEPTION #4

# UNCONSCIOUS BIAS IS **SO SUBTLE** THAT ANYONE HURT BY IT IS BEING TOO SENSITIVE

Often the people accused of being too sensitive aren't upset about, say, a single instance of being talked over in a meeting, but rather about years of dealing with a litany of similar slights and microaggressions. Acts of bias add up. A 90-minute commute may only



Acts of bias **ADD UP**. A 90-minute commute may only be bothersome at first, but the **TRUE COST** becomes apparent over time.



be bothersome at first, but the true cost becomes apparent over time, after missing out on umpteen family dinners or learning opportunities.

If you're unsure why someone is distressed about bias, try asking for the person's perspective before passing judgment:

*"I've never walked in your shoes, so I recognize your perspective. Do you mind sharing it with me? I think it would help me see where you're coming from."*

Be careful to make it okay for this person to accept or decline your request, depending on what they feel comfortable sharing with you.

## MISCONCEPTION #5

# PEOPLE ARE **TALKING** ABOUT UNCONSCIOUS BIAS BECAUSE CONSCIOUS BIAS ISN'T MUCH OF AN **ISSUE** ANYMORE

Bias, prejudice, and discrimination, in all their many forms, are still an ever-present reality in schools. For example, 70% of LGBTQ+ students experience verbal harassment just for identifying as LGBTQ+. The stress and trauma that harassed LGBTQ+ students encounter impacts achievement. They are three times as likely to miss school and/or to have lower gradepoint averages, and are twice as likely to report that they do not plan to pursue post-secondary education. These students report lower self-esteem and feelings of school belonging than their peers, and higher levels of depression.

To some, unconscious bias may not seem as serious in comparison to statistics like these. However, it is a mistake to think of conscious bias and unconscious bias as entirely separate things. Because we aren't aware they're happening, unconscious biases can sneak in and lead to things like hiring disparities and pay gaps - which are often cited as evidence of conscious bias.

The point is they're all worth striving to overcome—and a lot of the same tips and tactics can be used for both.



Because we **AREN'T AWARE** they're happening, unconscious biases can **SNEAK IN** and lead to systemic biases like hiring disparities and pay gaps.

## MISCONCEPTION #6

# IT'S NEVER WORTH **RESPONDING** WHEN YOU'RE THE **TARGET** OF BIAS IN THE WORKPLACE

In many cases, reacting to bias carries enough political risk that many feel all they can do is vent to a trusted colleague or significant other or let it go. And we want to be clear that those are perfectly valid responses if that is what is best for your situation.



You do have **OPTIONS** and considering them can help you determine your **BEST COURSE** of action.

In a recent survey, several people expressed regret that they hadn't done more. One individual, recalling a potentially sexist comment from her manager, said, "I decided it was too risky to press further. I wish I had anyway, or come up with a way to do that without putting him on the defensive."

You do have options, and considering them can help you determine your best course of action. If you decide to respond, here are two options that may be effective:

### 1. **SPEAK UP BY TELLING THE PERSON HOW BIAS IMPACTS YOU.**

Since most people don't intend to be biased, calling out someone as such—even when you're right—likely won't be well received—and it can increase the risk you take on. More effective: Try to assume best intent and share how the bias makes you feel. For example:

*"I'm sure you didn't mean it this way, but when you called my talk a 'little presentation' it made me feel like you don't value it as much as those by others on the team."*

### 2. **TEAM UP TO AMPLIFY YOUR VOICE.**

Teaming up might mean banding together with colleagues to advocate for more diversity and inclusion initiatives in your school or district. It might also help you to more effectively address policies or procedures that are having a disproportionate or unintended effect on certain people or groups in your organization.



A photograph of two young boys, one in a light blue shirt and one in a red shirt, looking at a document together. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent purple gradient. The text is positioned on the left side of the image.

—  
When you  
effectively confront  
bias, you **CREATE**  
**A SPACE** where  
we are all **VALUED**  
and able to  
**CONTRIBUTE**  
our best.

## MISCONCEPTION #7

# BEING AN **ALLY** MEANS MY BIASES ARE MORE IN CHECK

If you care about social justice, you might brand yourself an ally — someone doing their part. If so, there's a decent chance your biases really are more in check. Still, there are plenty of pitfalls lurking for allies, such as:

- **USING UNBIASED LANGUAGE AS LICENSE TO AVOID QUESTIONING YOURSELF.**

In the U.S., this is known as the “I have black/gay/disabled friends” defense, which can lead to complacency. Researchers find that, ironically, thinking of times when you were biased tends to temporarily lower your guard against bias.

- **ASSUMING A LEVEL OF COMFORT THAT'S UNPROFESSIONAL.**

Maybe outside of work you have a diverse set of close friends who joke about obesity, mental health, race, and culture. That doesn't mean such jokes are, or ever will be, appropriate in a school or professional setting.

- **OVERCOMPENSATING.**

This is the ally with a figurative megaphone, taking every opportunity to shout, “I'm an ally!” While publicly expressing



your support helps set a tone of inclusion, it can be overdone. One individual, who is gay, told us about a colleague who seems intent on talking about LGBTQ issues with him, to the point where “other people have commented on it — asking why she always asks me only about gay things.”

- **OVERLY ATTRIBUTING BEHAVIORS TO BIAS.**

While bias is everywhere, so is effort, luck, ability, absent-mindedness, and a slew of other factors that affect

workplace outcomes. It's important to remind yourself that there can be multiple things going on at once, versus just one bias in action.

The lesson: An ally's work is never done.

For additional information about how we can help your school or district identify your unconscious biases and increase diversity, equity and inclusion efforts, email [educate@franklincovey.com](mailto:educate@franklincovey.com) or visit [LeaderinMe.org](http://LeaderinMe.org).