

# Mitigating bias



Building a better  
working world

## We all have biases, now what can we do about it?

Each of us has an important role to play in creating an environment where everyone feels a sense of belonging and valued – where they are able to bring their differences to work and contribute to their fullest potential in every encounter. We all have biases that can unintentionally influence our behavior and decisions. Therefore, it is important to pause, reflect and challenge ourselves in our day-to-day interactions and seek out different perspectives when making decisions.

The purpose of this guide is to provide real-life examples of bias, and to equip everyone with reflective questions and practical actions to help mitigate potential bias, as you team and lead inclusively.

Leverage this guide to reflect individually and as a team, on how best to create conditions to mitigate bias in your teams.

## Bias basics

### Quick facts

#### What is bias?

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- ▶ We all have biases – it's a natural phenomenon
- ▶ People are often unaware of their unconscious biases – which are hidden from themselves and therefore complex
- ▶ Biases work as automatic responses triggered by our brain making quick judgments and assessments of people and situations – biases predict behavior
- ▶ Bias can be defined as a shortcut of the brain to attribute meaning or value (positive or negative) – it allows us to make decisions
- ▶ Bias may lead to assumptions, which, in turn, can lead to less optimal decisions; these may, in fact, not match our intent
- ▶ Bias may be positive or negative, and while positive biases may be advantageous for some, they disadvantage others

#### What shapes the biases we each may have?

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- ▶ Our background, cultural environment, personal experiences and current perceptions
- ▶ Our frame of reference – learned attitudes, values, perceptions, assumptions and opinions, including positive or negative stereotypes

#### When do biases most often arise?

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- ▶ When we feel pressure, stress due to workplace demands or the importance of a decision to an individual – e.g., someone's personal preference or liking
- ▶ When information is insufficient, ambiguous or unfocused
- ▶ When there is high conformity/similarity within a group
- ▶ When we strongly like or dislike someone
- ▶ When we try to reach closure (disagreement between parties; inconclusive evidence for making decisions)
- ▶ When we draw overall impressions or make sweeping single statements (e.g., "Having lived all of his life in his hometown, Michael could not possibly have the skills necessary for managing a cross-border team.")

## Types of bias

<p><b>Affinity (similar to me) bias</b></p> <p><b>Having a preference (or personal connection) for an individual who may be similar to you</b> (e.g., same gender, age, ethnicity, language, educational institute, interpersonal and/or work style). Perceiving people who are similar more positively than those who are different. May create an “insider vs. outsider” dynamic.</p> <p><i>Example: Johan has the same educational background and industry experience as I do, so I think he will be a great asset to our team!</i></p>	<p><b>Confirmation bias</b></p> <p><b>Looking for information that confirms your assumption about someone.</b></p> <p>Involves selective attention to information that supports your stance or belief – dismissing opinions – no matter how valid. Confirms pre-existing perceptions or stereotypes without using actual or objective information.</p> <p><i>Example: I had a feeling when I interviewed Nancy that she would not be the right fit for our team. She's just too quiet to be working on top client accounts. We need someone more sure of oneself.</i></p>	<p><b>Halo effect</b></p> <p><b>Where someone's positive qualities create positive perceptions in other areas</b> (e.g., job performance, leadership ability). An individual is rated highly in all areas because of one thing they do really well.</p> <p><i>Example: Given her strong communication skills and likability, I suggest we make Sierra the account leader without delay.</i></p>
<p><b>Horn effect</b></p> <p><b>An individual is denied progression because of one thing they do not do well.</b></p> <p>One negative trait overshadows other traits, behaviors, beliefs, etc.</p> <p><i>Example: Given Xin Hua's discomfort with delivering presentations, I think it would be fair to ask him to step off this project.</i></p>	<p><b>Spillover effect</b></p> <p><b>Pertains to a manager or evaluator judging the current performance of an EY professional by using past performance as a reference point.</b></p> <p><i>Example: Although it is a great opportunity to build her portfolio, I don't think Gabriella has what it takes. The new role will require her working across geographies, and we all know how uncomfortable she was in facilitating the global network call early on in the year.</i></p>	<p><b>Projection</b></p> <p><b>A feature in human thinking where one thinks that others have the same priorities, attitudes or beliefs as oneself, even if this is unlikely to be the case.</b></p> <p><i>Example: I remember when my father was unwell a few years ago and how working from home made all the difference. We should consider taking Kelly off that engagement so she has time to care for her mother – especially during busy season.</i></p>
<p><b>Recency effect</b></p> <p><b>When the individual's most recent behavior becomes the primary focus of the review.</b></p> <p>Note: This can go both ways. A poor performer does something terrific and the past performance is forgotten, and vice versa with an exceptional performer.</p> <p><i>Example: He may have solid global experience, but Ricardo's presentation to the Japanese team last week was not 100%. I think we should hold back with the promotion until he has a few more opportunities to prove himself.</i></p>	<p><b>Anchoring bias</b></p> <p><b>The tendency to rely too heavily, or “anchor,” on one trait or piece of information when making decisions – usually the first piece of information.</b></p> <p><i>Example: Given that Kiran had a difficult pregnancy, it would be best not to put her on our new cross-border team as soon as she's back from maternity leave because it will require monthly travel.</i></p>	<p><b>Distance</b></p> <p><b>Favoring those who are closer in proximity by location, time zone and relationship</b> (e.g., rank, Service Lines, language).</p> <p><i>Example: I'm more comfortable with having Zarul work with us on the XYZ account. It's a Channel 1 account – I would prefer someone based in Malaysia vs. Sydney so that the full team is in the same time zone and can work “real time.”</i></p>



## Examples of how bias may show up and key things to watch out for

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### Inclusive tips

#### 1. Frame of reference

- ▶ Be aware of the **different beliefs and values that you use (your frame of reference) when evaluating others and forming opinions about others** – the aim for you is to be equitable.
- ▶ **Be aware of your own individual biases** (e.g., considering that introverts lack leadership potential vs. extroverts because they are less vocal).

#### 2. Preference, tradition or requirement

- ▶ **Ensure your assessment is based on true requirements of the individual's role.** If the evaluation seems based on your preferences or traditions (historical ways of operating), **stop and reflect – as it may lead to an inequitable outcome.**
- ▶ Think about the **skills required to deliver quality results and successfully meet client/team objectives** in the role vs. what you prefer.

#### 3. Making assumptions

- ▶ When we make assumptions, we very clearly label who is **“in” and who is “out.”**
- ▶ Examples:
  - ▶ Moms prefer not to travel; therefore, I'll put someone else on the engagement.
  - ▶ She is only working “part-time,” so we should not go out of our way to give her the best client opportunities. I do not think she cares as much as some of the other managers.
  - ▶ Because he's quiet, he doesn't understand or care.
  - ▶ Being a partner requires you to look and act a certain way.
- ▶ Ask yourself the following: Which assumptions am I making and why? Think about the assumptions we might make when **coaching, assessing performance, providing feedback, assigning jobs or looking at promotions and who to sponsor.**

## Actions and questions to help mitigate the unintended impact of bias

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### Action: call out and address the impact of bias – awareness isn't enough

- ▶ **Reflect on automatic responses.** Recognize your biases, talk about them with others. **Pause to think about how you can challenge bias** by adopting different behaviors and habits.
- ▶ Call out where you see bias and inequities.
- ▶ **Check where your help lands** (who you sponsor, share information with, give stretch assignments, developmental feedback, etc.). **Are you keeping things uneven** (help some, usually the same) – **or making things more equitable for everyone?**

### Action: use consistent criteria to evaluate the match between business needs and the individual's competencies

- ▶ **Think of personal preferences** (accent, college/university, age, communication style, etc.) that influence your behavior. Stay vigilant and alert, and **identify 1-2 actions to implement** – e.g., focus on the requirements of the role and ask others for their perspectives.
- ▶ **Challenge the comment “it will be a great cultural fit”** which might embody deep-rooted positive bias toward those who think, work or look like us. Consider reframing the thinking to how candidates from a different background can “add” to the culture – not fit into it.

### Action: develop stylistic and cross-cultural agility and curiosity

- ▶ **Counter stylistic preferences.** Do you prefer a specific communication style in your team? **Are you favoring someone with the same work and communication style as yourself?**
- ▶ **Be genuinely curious about other's differences.** Look for opportunities to work and learn with people from different backgrounds and cultures to build your knowledge and understanding. There may be many similarities as well.
- ▶ **Upskill yourself.** Understanding one's biases is the first step to practice inclusion. It opens the door to further develop specific skills such as emotional intelligence, leading with agility and leveraging multiple perspectives for sound decision-making.

**For further learning, consider completing our new *Inclusive Leadership for All e-learning program* that you can access through the My Learning Assignments section in SuccessFactors.**

## Additional resources

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1. Belonging – [Creating a sense of belonging for all global guide](#)
2. Preference, tradition or requirement (PTR) – [Learn more](#)
3. Complete our new **Inclusive Leadership for All e-learning program** that you can access through the My Learning Assignments section in SuccessFactors
4. Apply to the **Inclusion & Belonging badge** that you can find on the EY badges platform.

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