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# 19 unconscious biases to overcome and help promote inclusivity

[Team Asana](#)

January 4th, 2025 • 16 min read

## Summary

Unconscious biases are learned assumptions, beliefs, or attitudes that we aren't necessarily aware of. While bias is a normal part of human brain function, it can often reinforce stereotypes. To combat unconscious bias, learn about different types of biases, how they might surface at work, and how to avoid them so you can build a more inclusive and diverse workplace.

Whether we realize it or not, our unconscious biases influence our professional lives, from the way we think to the way we interact with colleagues. Unconscious biases are mental shortcuts that aid decision-making as the brain processes millions of pieces of information per second.

That being said, these biases can lead to skewed judgments and reinforce stereotypes, doing more harm than good for companies when it comes to recruitment and decision-making.

It's especially important to be aware of these biases during the hiring process since they can impact the success of your future team.

To help you recognize and combat unconscious bias in the workplace, we cover 19 unconscious bias examples and prevention strategies. Taking the steps to reduce biases will help you improve inclusivity, trust, and productivity within your company.

## See Asana in action

Drive clarity and impact at scale by connecting work and workflows to company-wide goals.

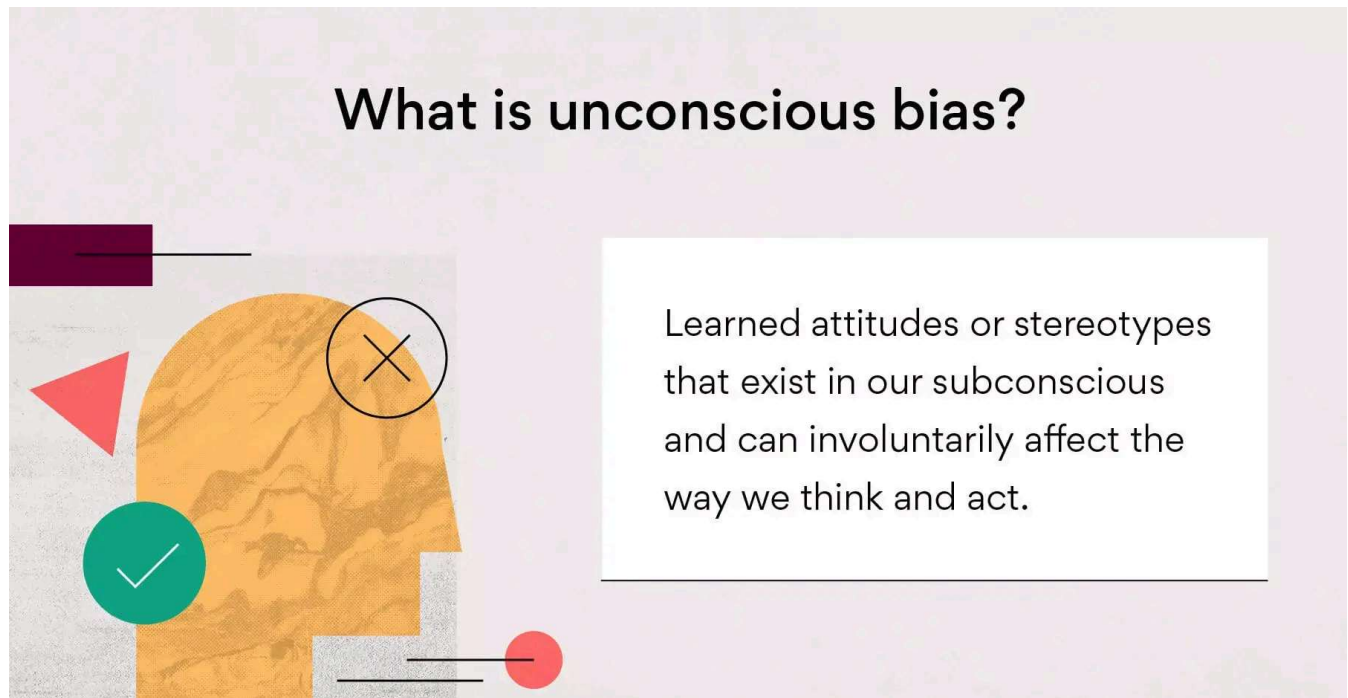
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# What is unconscious bias?

Unconscious bias, also known as implicit bias, is a learned assumption, belief, or attitude that exists in the subconscious. Everyone has these biases and uses them as mental shortcuts for faster information-processing.

Implicit biases are developed over time as we accumulate life experiences and get exposed to different stereotypes.

According to the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, "These biases, which encompass both favorable and unfavorable assessments, are activated involuntarily and without an individual's awareness or intentional control."



As a result, unconscious biases can have a big influence on our limiting beliefs and behaviors. When this translates to our professional lives, it can affect the way we hire, interact with colleagues, and make business decisions.

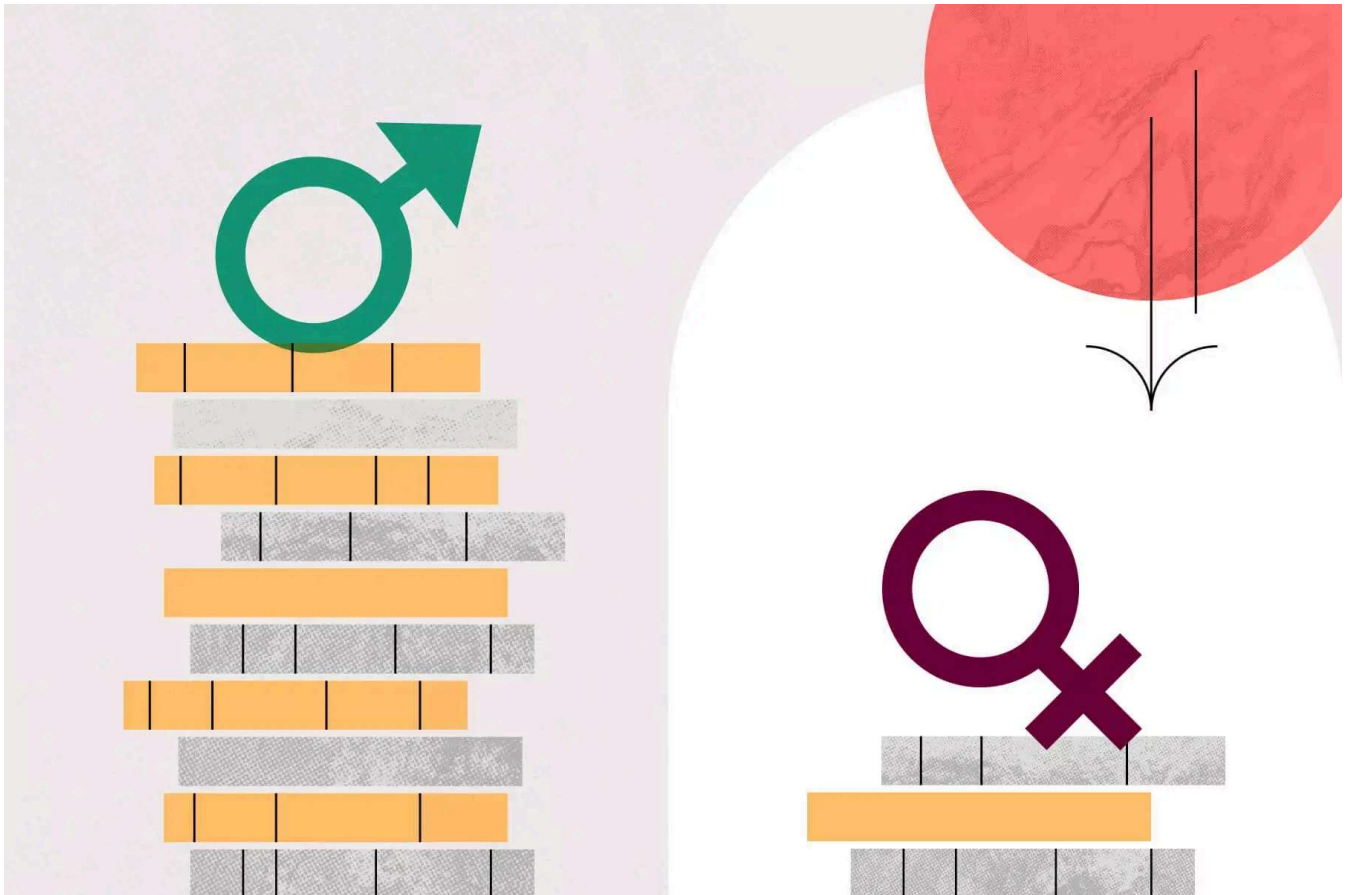
If not properly addressed, these biases can negatively impact a company's workplace culture and team dynamics.

Although these biases are pervasive, you can reduce their impact with deliberate attention and effort. Being aware of and understanding the different types of biases that exist can help you find ways to combat them.

# Types of unconscious bias

Unconscious biases manifest in different ways and have varying consequences. Some biases arise from judging people's appearances, some are derived from preconceived notions, and others are borne of logical fallacies. We explore these common biases in detail below.

## 1. Gender bias



Gender bias, the favoring of one gender over another, is also often referred to as sexism. This bias occurs when someone unconsciously associates certain stereotypes with different genders.

This type of bias may affect recruitment practices and relationship dynamics within the company. An example of this bias during hiring is if the hiring panel favors male candidates over female candidates even though they have similar skills and job experience.

Another well-known example is the gender pay gap. As of 2021, the average median salary for men is about 18% higher than women's.

The gender bias may reduce job and career advancement opportunities for certain populations.

## How to avoid gender bias

Here are some ways to create a more gender-diverse workplace:

- Set gender-neutral recruitment standards: Define the ideal candidate profile ahead of time and evaluate all candidates against those standards.
- Create diversity goals: Set qualitative gender diversity goals to create a more gender-balanced team. Support and provide resources for women to take on leadership roles.

Read: [Why you should care about diversity and inclusion](#) →

## 2. Ageism

Ageism refers to stereotyping or discriminating against others based on their age, often happening to older team members.

Although workers ages 40 and older are protected from workplace discrimination under the Age Discrimination in Employment Act, filing for a lawsuit against an employer can be a lengthy and costly process.

Because not everyone files a complaint, ageism is still a prevalent issue. An [AARP survey](#) found that about 60% of workers age 45 and older have seen or experienced age discrimination in the workplace.

An example of ageism is if an older team member was passed over for a promotion, which ended up going to a younger team member with less seniority and experience.

Companies that discriminate based on age may lose out on the valuable knowledge and experience that older workers bring. There may also be serious legal consequences if a team member decides to file a job discrimination lawsuit.

### How to avoid ageism bias

Preventing ageism involves combatting age-related stereotypes as well as engaging older team members in the workplace. Here are some ways to do that:

- Don't make assumptions based on age: For example, don't automatically presume that older workers don't know how to use technology or aren't open to learning new skills. Provide equal learning opportunities for everyone.
- Foster cross-generational collaboration: Create two-way mentorship programs where a senior team member is paired with a new hire. This kind of [collaboration facilitates communication](#) between team members of different stages, which can help break down misconceptions about age.

## 3. Name bias

Name bias is the tendency to prefer certain names over others, usually Anglo-sounding names.

Name bias is most prevalent in recruitment. If a recruiter tends to offer interviews to candidates with Anglo-sounding names over equally qualified candidates with non-Anglo names, this bias is present.

Name bias can have a negative impact on diversity hiring and result in companies missing out on talented candidates.

## How to avoid name bias

A simple solution to avoid name bias is to omit names of candidates when screening. To do this, you can:

- Use software: Use blind hiring software to block out candidates' personal details on resumes.
- Do it manually: Designate a team member to remove personal information on resumes for the hiring team.

## 4. Beauty bias

Beauty bias refers to the favorable treatment and positive stereotyping of individuals who are considered more attractive. This has also given rise to the term "lookism," which is discrimination based on physical appearance.

An example of beauty bias is a hiring manager who is more inclined to hire candidates they think are good-looking.

Hiring decisions should be based on skills, experience, and culture fit rather than physical appearance.

## How to avoid beauty bias

Here are some ways to avoid beauty bias when screening job applicants:

- Omit pictures from resumes: Focus on an applicant's qualifications and experience when screening resumes.
- Conduct telephone screening: Before scheduling an interview, consider doing a short telephone interview to get to know the applicant better without being influenced by their appearance.

## 5. Halo effect

The halo effect, a term coined by psychologist Edward Thorndike in the 1920s, occurs when we develop an overall positive impression of someone because of one of their qualities or traits.

This effect may lead us to inadvertently put people on a pedestal since we're constructing an image of a person based on limited information.

An example of this effect in recruitment is when a hiring manager sees that a candidate graduated from a prestigious school and assumes that they excel at their job.

This halo is based on the hiring manager's academic preferences. However, the school that someone went to doesn't necessarily determine their level of job competency.

By focusing too much on one positive trait, we may overlook negative behavior that could end up harming the company—for example, if a candidate was fired for misconduct in a previous job.

## How to avoid the halo effect

To reduce the impact of the halo effect, you could try out different interviewing strategies:

- **Conduct multiple interviews:** Set up several rounds of interviews for candidates with different levels of management. That way, a candidate can be evaluated from various perspectives.
- **Diversify your interview team:** Getting someone from another team to interview the candidate may help since they'll have less reason to "halo" them as they won't be working with them directly.

## 6. Horns effect

The horns effect is the opposite of the halo effect. This bias causes us to have a negative impression of someone based on one trait or experience.

Putting too much weight on a single trait or interaction with someone can lead to inaccurate and unfair judgments of their character.

For example, a new team member thinks the constructive criticism they received from their manager is harsh and assumes that their manager is a critical and stern person.

If left unchecked, the horns effect can damage the cohesiveness and trust between team members.

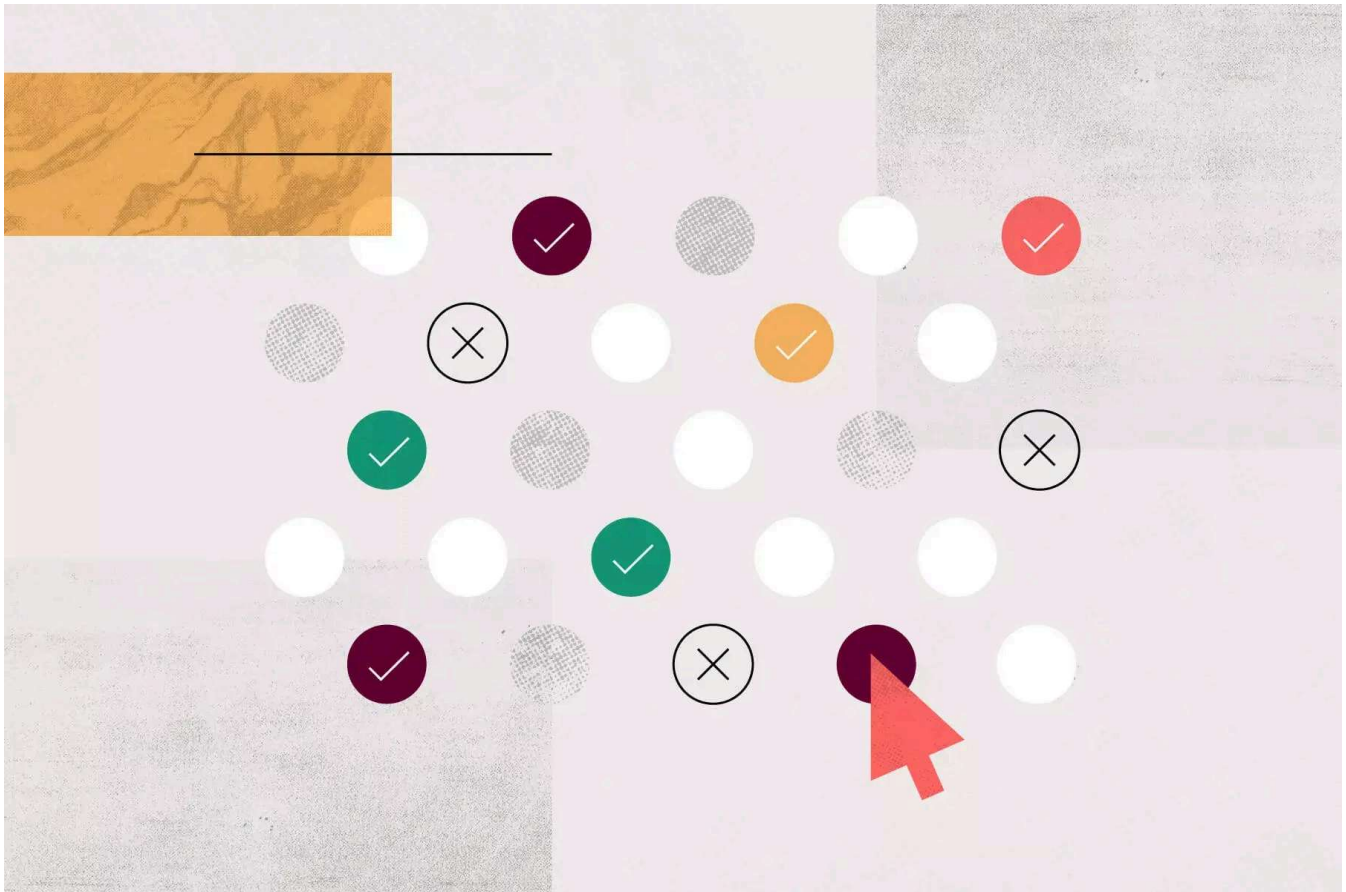
## How to avoid the horns effect

In order to reduce the horns effect when interacting with others, try to:

- **Challenge your first impressions:** Take the time to get to know someone so you can develop a more concrete impression of that person as a whole.
- **Make judgments based on evidence:** Ask yourself how you developed your first impression of someone and find evidence to support or refute that impression based on additional interactions.



## 7. Confirmation bias



Confirmation bias is the tendency to seek out and use information that confirms one's views and expectations. In other words, cherry-picking information to validate certain points.

This affects our ability to think critically and objectively, which can lead to skewed interpretations of information and overlooking information with opposing views.

For example, a product developer comes up with a product idea for the athletic market. Although market research shows little interest in the product, they try to validate the idea by reaching out to athlete friends who they know will support the idea.

Although there's gratification in validating a current idea, it's important to consider the potential consequences of following through with the idea.

### How to avoid confirmation bias

Here are some ways to reduce confirmation bias:

- **Gather multiple sources:** Whenever you're testing a hypothesis or conducting research, gather information from a wide variety of sources to get a balanced perspective.

- Standardize interview questions: When recruiting new talent, come up with a list of standard interview questions to prevent asking off-topic or pointed questions that may or may not confirm your beliefs about a candidate.

Read: Inclusion starts on day one: 10 ways to build an inclusive onboarding experience →

## 8. Conformity bias

Conformity bias is similar to groupthink, which occurs when we change our opinions or behaviors to match that of the bigger group, even if it doesn't reflect our own opinions.

This bias may occur when we encounter peer pressure or are trying to fit into a certain social group or professional environment.

For example, a team is deciding between two proposals. One person thinks proposal A is better, but the rest of the team is leaning towards proposal B. That person is swayed by their opinions and ends up voting for proposal B because everyone else did.

Although conformity can help prevent conflicts, it may also limit creativity, open discussions, and having other perspectives available.

### How to avoid conformity bias

Here are some ways to help encourage honest opinions in the workplace:

- Use anonymous votes or surveys: The option to give feedback anonymously allows the freedom to express opinions without worrying about others' preferences.
- Ask for opinions in advance: Before going into a meeting, have a private conversation with each team member to get their opinions. This gives everyone plenty of time to think about a topic and express their thoughts without the pressure of presenting in front of colleagues.

## 9. Affinity bias

Affinity bias is also known as the similarity bias and refers to the tendency to favor people who share similar interests, backgrounds, and experiences. We tend to feel more comfortable around people who are like us.

This bias may affect hiring decisions. For example, a hiring manager gravitates towards a job applicant because they share the same alma mater.

Over time, the affinity bias in hiring can hamper a company's diversity and inclusion efforts.



## How to avoid affinity bias

While eliminating affinity bias entirely may not be possible, there are ways to reduce its effects:

- Create a diverse hiring panel: Different people with varying perspectives and interests that conduct interviews can help reduce the affinity bias of one individual.
- Go beyond hiring for "culture fit": The more hiring managers have in common with candidates, the more likely they are to evaluate them as a good "culture fit." But the term "culture fit" is vague, and it can mean different things to different people. To assess candidates fairly, use specific language and examples when sharing feedback about them. Describe how well they embody company values or align with company missions.

## 10. Contrast effect

We often make judgments by making comparisons. As a result, our judgments may be altered depending on what standard we're comparing something to. This is known as the contrast effect.

For instance, a team member is happy to receive a "meets expectations" on their performance review. However, they start to feel inadequate after finding out most of their colleagues got "exceeds expectations" on their reviews.

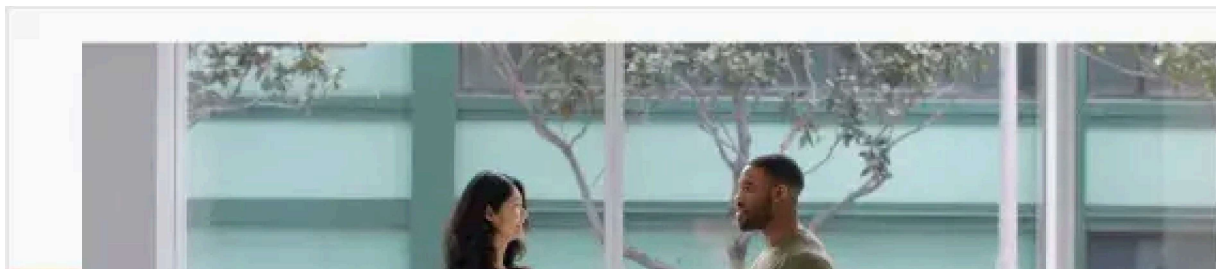
Even though they got a decent review, the team member judges themselves more critically since their comparison standard is their colleagues' results.

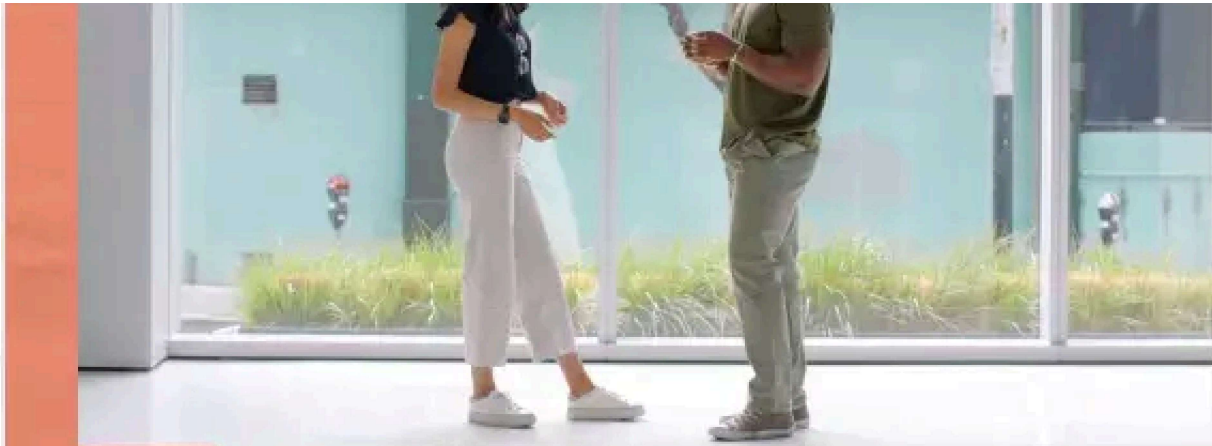
There can also be positive contrast effects, which occur when something is perceived to be better than usual because it's being compared to something worse.

## How to avoid the contrast effect

Here are some strategies to try when using comparisons to make decisions:

- Make multiple comparisons: Instead of coming to a conclusion after making one comparison, compare something against different standards to broaden your perspective.
- Talk it out: Explain how you came to a given conclusion to your colleagues so they can understand your point of view.





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This bias describes our preference for the way things are or for things to remain as they are, which can result in resistance to change.

Following the status quo is a safe option and takes less effort, but it also results in becoming stagnant. As the business landscape continues to shift, change is necessary for business longevity and innovation.

An example of the status quo bias in a company is continuing to hire team members from the same demographic group, making no effort to move forward with diversity goals.

By repeatedly engaging in the same hiring practices, you may miss out on great candidates who can bring fresh ideas and perspectives to your company.

## How to avoid the status quo bias

Here are some ways you can challenge the status quo:

- Use the framing effect: We often follow the status quo to avoid a loss, which we place greater weight on compared to gains. The framing effect involves looking at the default option as a loss to encourage exploring alternative options as gains.
- Encourage outside-the-box thinking: Create an environment that celebrates creativity and innovation. Adapt an open mindset to change so that your team can continue to push the status quo.

## 12. Anchor bias

Anchor bias occurs when we overly rely on the first piece of information we receive as an anchor to base our decision-making upon. This causes us to see things from a narrow perspective.

For example, the first thing a recruiter finds out about a candidate they're interviewing is that they were unemployed for the past year. The recruiter focuses on this fact rather than the candidate's solid

qualifications and skills.

Instead of relying on one piece of information to make a decision, it's important to look at the whole picture.

## How to avoid anchor bias

It takes time to make a thoughtful decision. Here are some tips to keep in mind:

- **Conduct thorough research:** The first option may not always be the best one. Explore various possible options and their pros and cons before deciding.
- **Brainstorm with your team:** Discussing a given decision with your teammates can help reveal the strengths and weaknesses of a plan.

## 13. Authority bias



Authority bias refers to the tendency to believe in authority figures and follow their instructions.

Generally, following a trusted authority figure with relevant expertise is a good idea. However, blindly following a leader's direction without your own critical thinking may cause future issues.

For example, if a team member unquestionably follows their manager's instructions to write a report in a way that matches the manager's opinions, this could jeopardize the integrity of the report.

When receiving instructions on an area outside of your manager's expertise, it can be worthwhile to seek additional information or expertise to minimize potential issues that may arise.

## How to avoid authority bias

As with many unconscious biases, developing awareness of the bias is a good first step to countering it.

Here is how to avoid being influenced by authority bias:

- **Ask questions:** Don't be afraid to ask your manager or company leader questions. The level of detail they provide may be an indicator of whether an idea was well thought-out or if it's their authority coming into play.
- **Do your research:** Conduct your own research on a given topic to identify other credible sources or experts and see whether their suggestions align with your manager's suggestions.

Read: [Leadership vs. management: What's the difference?](#) →

## 14. Overconfidence bias

Overconfidence bias is the tendency for people to think they are better at certain abilities and skills than they actually are.

This false assessment of our skill levels, stemming from an illusion of knowledge or control, can lead us to make rash decisions.

For instance, an overconfident CEO decides to acquire a startup that they see high potential in and believe will bring high returns even though their performance indicates otherwise.

Previous success or accomplishments may lead to an inflated ego. While leading with confidence is a good thing, it's important to not let it get in the way of logical thinking and decision-making.

## How to avoid overconfidence bias

Here are tips to follow when you're making decisions:

- **Consider the consequences:** The decisions you make can have an impact on your company. Before committing to a decision, determine all the possible outcomes to ensure you're prepared for them.
- **Ask for feedback:** Getting feedback from your team can help you identify areas of improvement, whether it's related to your performance or your ideas. Constructive criticism can keep egos in check.

Read: How to give and take constructive criticism →

## 15. Perception bias

Perception bias occurs when we judge or treat others based on often inaccurate, overly simplistic stereotypes and assumptions about the group they belong in. It may involve other biases such as gender, age, and appearance.

This type of bias may result in social exclusion, discrimination, and an overall reduction of a company's diversity goals.

Say, for example, a team member doesn't invite a teammate to an after-work social event because they assumed that they wouldn't share similar interests with the group.

Perception bias can make it difficult to have an objective understanding about members from diverse groups.

### How to avoid perception bias

Reducing the impact of perception bias requires recognizing your biases:

- Challenge your assumptions: Ask yourself, "How well do I really know that person or the group they belong to?" Don't let preconceived notions prevent you from meeting or including new people.
- Think about the accuracy of statements: When you find yourself using strong words like "all," "always," and "never" to describe a certain group, pause and take a moment to ask yourself how accurate the description is.

## 16. Illusory correlation

Illusory correlation is when we associate two variables, events, or actions together even though they're unrelated to each other.

For example, a hiring manager asks a candidate interview questions in an effort to gain insight into their personality but are unrelated to the job itself. Since the candidate struggles to come up with answers, the hiring manager decides they would not be a good fit.

These illusions can lead us to making decisions based on inaccurate correlations.

### How to avoid illusory correlation bias

We may be more prone to see false correlations in circumstances that we're unfamiliar with or have little knowledge of.



Here are tips to avoid making illusory correlations:

- **Get informed:** Learning more about the areas you're not familiar with can help you find evidence to support or refute the correlation.
- **Consider all possibilities:** When you associate two things, consider the likelihood of the cause and effect. You can also use a contingency table to visualize the relationships between the cause and effect.

## 17. Affect heuristic

Heuristics are mental shortcuts that help us make decisions more efficiently. The affect heuristic occurs when we rely on our emotions to make decisions. This may help us reach a conclusion more quickly, though it may not always be accurate or fair.

For example, an interview candidate makes an off-hand comment that offends a recruiter, though that wasn't their intention. The recruiter decides to reject the candidate because they were vexed by the comment even though they were the most qualified candidate.

Since emotions may cloud your judgment, it's important not to make decisions in the heat of a moment.

### How to avoid the affect heuristic bias

Here are ways to lower the influence of emotions in different circumstances:

- **Be aware of your emotions:** Simply being aware of our level of emotions in a situation can help us step back from the situation and evaluate it more logically.
- **Take time to reflect:** Reflect on an event some time after it occurs. Your emotions likely won't be as strong as they were during the event, so you'll be able to come to a more objective conclusion.

## 18. Recency bias

Recency bias occurs when we attribute greater importance to recent events over past events because they're easier to remember.

This bias is more likely to occur when we have to process a large amount of information. For example, since hiring managers often review a high volume of job applications in a day, it may be harder to recall candidates screened earlier during the day.

Recency bias can also manifest during the interview process when a hiring manager becomes more inclined to make hiring decisions based on the most recent candidate they interviewed.

To overcome this bias, using techniques to strengthen your memory can be helpful.



## How to avoid recency bias

Here are some tips to prevent recency bias when interviewing candidates:

- **Take notes:** Take detailed notes during each interview and review them afterward. This can help you keep track of notable candidates regardless of when you interviewed them.
- **Give yourself mental breaks:** Doing back-to-back interviews can be mentally draining. When your working memory takes a toll, you're more likely to be affected by recency bias. Stay mentally alert by taking breaks in between interviews so your brain has time to absorb and remember the information.

## 19. Idiosyncratic rater bias

Idiosyncratic rater bias affects the way we evaluate the performance of others. We often rate others based on our subjective interpretations of the assessment criteria and our own definition of what "success" looks like.

In other words, we're generally unreliable when it comes to rating other people. Research has found that about 60% of a manager's rating is a reflection of the manager rather than the team member they're rating.

For example, a manager who excels at project management has higher standards for this skill and gives harsher ratings to team members for this skill. On the other hand, the manager is more lenient when rating team members' marketing skills because they are less familiar with that area.

Read: [25 essential project management skills you need to succeed](#) →

Sources of rater bias may come from other biases, such as the halo effect, affinity bias, and confirmation bias.

## How to avoid idiosyncratic rater bias

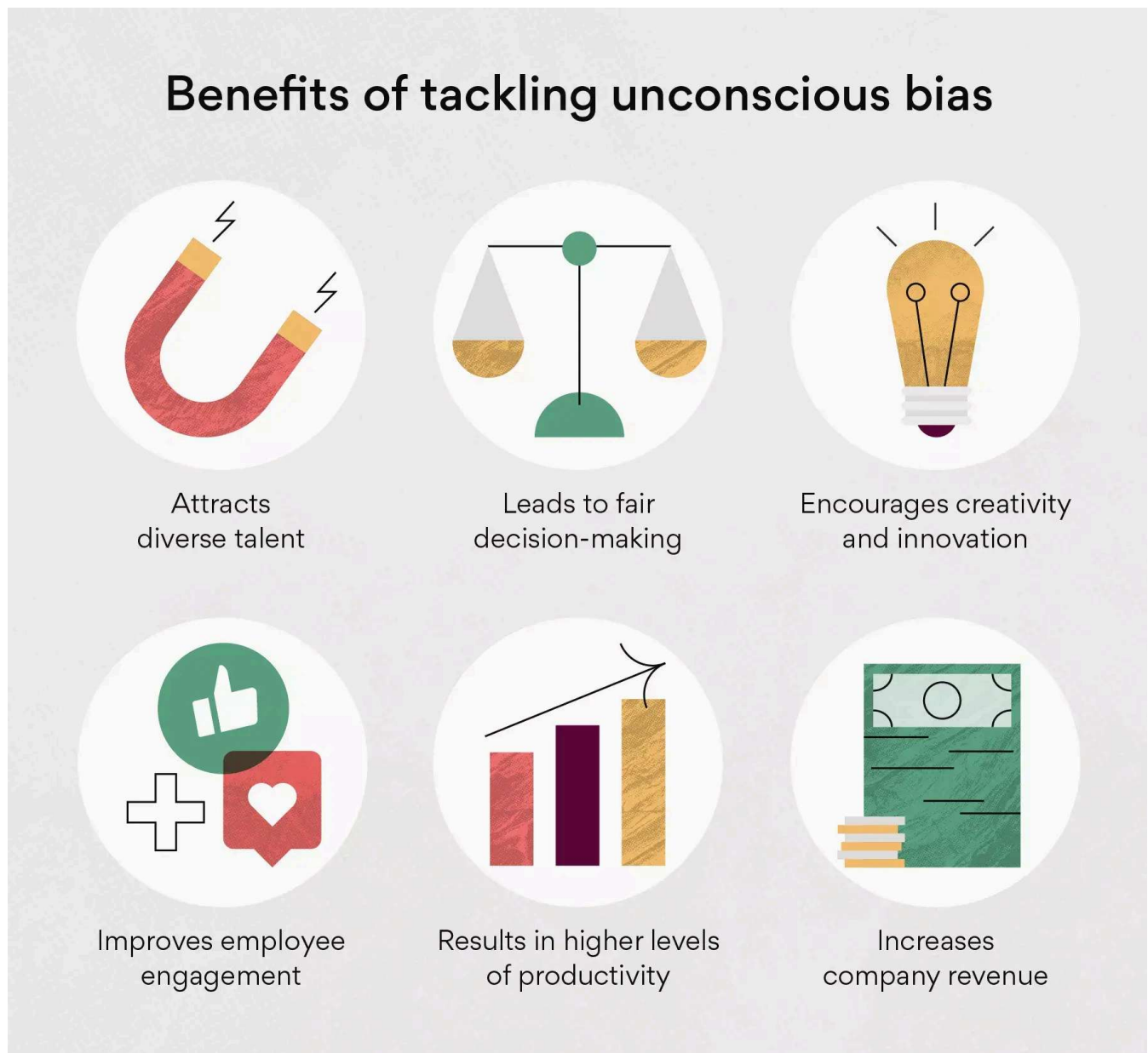
Here are some strategies to avoid this bias when doing performance reviews:

- **Set specific and clear assessment criteria:** Create a rubric or a specific set of standards for evaluating performance. This prompts managers to provide supporting evidence based on a team member's performance or achievements to determine how well they did.
- **Conduct multi-rater reviews:** This process involves a team member getting feedback from their colleagues and managers in addition to doing a self-evaluation. Having multiple reviews to draw from can help managers gain a more holistic view of a team member's performance and identify potential areas for growth.

# Why it's important to tackle unconscious biases

As these examples show, unconscious biases can hinder decision-making, impact team dynamics and leadership styles, and limit company diversity. This, in turn, can reduce equal opportunities for team members and job applicants.

Tackling unconscious biases can help address these issues, as well as improve company diversity.



Increased company diversity can bring additional benefits such as:

1. **Increasing company profitability:** Teams that have solid problem-solving and decision-making skills can bring a competitive advantage to a company. For example, a McKinsey study found that gender-diverse companies were 21% more likely to gain above-average profitability.

2. Attracting diverse talent through inclusive hiring practices: By implementing inclusive recruitment strategies, companies are able to reach out to a wider talent pool. Job seekers would also be more likely to apply to companies that prioritize diversity.
3. Increasing innovation: Diverse teams can bring a variety of fresh ideas to the table, allowing teams to come up with creative solutions that can drive sales. For example, a study by the Boston Consulting Group found that companies with diverse management teams bring 19% higher innovation revenue.
4. Boosting company productivity: University research found that tech firms with diverse management teams have 1.32 times higher levels of productivity. Increased productivity can lead to more efficient project management and implementation.
5. Encouraging higher employee engagement: Deloitte research showed that company diversity is directly related to employee engagement. Higher employee engagement can lead to higher job satisfaction, which in turn, can lower the turnover rate.
6. Making fair and more efficient business decisions: Inclusive teams can make better business decisions up to 87% of the time. These business decisions can help improve a company's performance and revenue.

Read: [Asana's approach to Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity](#) →

## Be conscious of your unconscious biases

The good news: Once you're aware of your unconscious biases, you can take steps to mitigate their effects. By taking micro-steps such as revamping your interview questions template and encouraging cross-team collaboration, you're working towards a more diverse and inclusive workplace environment for you and your team.

