

Understanding race bias at work

Five rules for tackling racial bias

Narrator: The environment in which we operate will have a significant influence on how much bias affects our behaviour and decision-making. We all have a part to play in challenging racial bias and prejudice, and creating an environment that supports greater equality. And this starts with being aware of the little things that we say and do.

Martin Reeves: If you don't deal with these kind of micro-behaviours, whether they be sort of micro-aggressive or just unconscious kind of words used, behaviours, actions, even things like, for example, how you set up meetings, which might sound really, kind of, micro beyond micro, but the way in which we set up a meeting space, the physical environment in which you run your organisation, unless you think more acutely and consciously, and take feedback, particularly from those with different backgrounds, different understanding of how business is done and how they can get their voices heard. Of course, if you don't do that, it then becomes completely accepted within the structures and the culture of the organisation that there is nothing wrong. This is the way we do business around here.

So, the danger of hiding it, not understanding it, is you don't readjust, you don't amend. And you continue the work practice, and indeed, the language, the behaviour, the way in which we interact in the same way because it's not so blatant, not so acute, not so pernicious in a way that it's clearly been in decades in the past.

Narrator: Having meaningful contact with people from different backgrounds is key to tackling racial bias and prejudice, so it's important to look at the people we deal with on a regular basis and consider how diverse our social and professional interactions really are.

Binna Kandola: There's a disparity as well, in terms of our expressed attitudes and our behaviour. And this is a great change that's happened over the last 50 years, that people are far more comfortable having a minority as a neighbour, as a colleague, as a partner. But surveys also show, for example, that people have no problem at all at the thought of having a minority person round for dinner. But very few people have had a minority person round for dinner. So there's this kind of segregation aspect that kind of occurs where I would be comfortable having somebody round to my house for dinner or going to their house for dinner. It just has never happened. But we don't reflect on that and kind of say, "Well, I wonder why that is. And what's my circle of friendships like? Am I self-segregating? Are we self-segregating?" Even though we like to think that we have very liberal, tolerant attitudes.

Narrator: We are much more likely to fall victim to bias and prejudice when we are tired, overloaded, or under time pressure. Simply recognising these factors and taking steps to minimise their impact, can make a huge difference to our fairness and objectivity.

For example, we can reschedule decisions when time pressures arise, or when we are tired or stressed. And we can limit the number of simultaneous tasks involved in the decision-making process. It's important to reflect on past decisions that we've made and consider whether bias played a role in them and to focus on being accurate in our judgements rather than reacting to emotional triggers.

Binna Kandola: We need to build in protocols into our systems and processes which enable people to think more fairly. So, you ask them, actually, when we're doing our performance management, the most important thing when you're doing the performance management ratings is accuracy. Research has shown that if you just give that, that goal, we want to be accurate, we want you to be accurate in the description of performance and the rating you give people, that helps to overcome some of the biases.

Narrator: Our backgrounds play an important part in how we interpret situations, and one person's viewpoint may be radically different to another's.

- So, your English is very good. Where are you from?

- I'm from Bromley in Kent. Just outside of London.

- No, I mean, you know, originally.

- Well, my parents are from Hong Kong, but we moved to London when I was a baby. And I went to school and university here, so...

- Ah, so you're Chinese. Right. Well, your English is very good. Well done, you. Now, how do you say, 'After you' in Chinese?

- I couldn't tell you, to be honest. I don't speak it that well.

- Oh.

Narrator: Perspective-taking is all about making a conscious effort to understand another person's point of view and trying to see, think and feel what they may be experiencing.

Seema Patel: I think there's a difference in perception of whether racism exists, largely because people are different and they have different experiences. There is also, I think, a lack of awareness. If you haven't experienced it yourself, how would you know? Why would you think it was still there, because you haven't experienced it? So, I think a key issue and one we're trying to address is having the conversation because if you don't have the conversation, then you don't know other people's perspectives.

Narrator: None of us is free from bias, and recognising and accepting this fact is the most important step on the journey to achieving real equality for everyone.

Binna Kandola: The very comforting kind of belief that you can have which is that, yeah, I accept racism exists. Thankfully, it's not me, but the other people need to sort themselves out. It requires us not to be so complacent, not to be so arrogant, to be a little more humble that, actually, it could be me, and that maybe I need to reflect on my own attitudes, my own decisions, the way that I interact with other people.

- I'm not above being sexist, homophobic, racist myself, and I recognise that we all have prejudices, but we have to manage them. And I think that that's one of the things I would say to people is to manage your prejudices.

- Don't make assumptions. That is really crucial. Too many people make assumptions based on just what you look like. Just because I'm black doesn't mean that I'm part of that stereotype that you've seen on television or somebody has told you about.

- If you are genuinely curious, like, don't be afraid to ask, but don't presume anything about me. It might be true, what you presume might be true, but just ask it. You know? And maybe a lot of things you presume might not be true.

- Don't see difference as a threat. And I think that is probably where we need to start educating people to realise that we're all valuable and we all have our place on this planet.