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Unconscious bias in recruitment and decision making committees

Learn about unconscious bias and how it can impact decision making in recruitment and decision making.

What is bias

Bias can be conscious or unconscious. Often, conscious bias can be easier to address as the individual is generally aware of their bias and can seek to moderate their own behaviour, or receive feedback from others, that the bias is unacceptable.


Unconscious bias refers to a bias that we are unaware of. Unconscious bias happens by our brains making incredibly quick judgments and assessments of people and situations without us realising. This is because our brains need to take shortcuts when processing information and data. If they didn't, we would be unable to function effectively. These shortcuts are influenced by our background, cultural environment and personal experiences.

We can't stop our brain using shortcuts, however we can take actions to address our biases, to make sure the decisions we are make are fair and in line with our values. In this handout you'll find information, tips,

and links to additional resources to support fair and equitable decision making.

If you haven't been on a recruitment panel or promotions committee previously you need to complete the online course: **Moving from Bias to Inclusion in a DEI Journey through our Online Leadership Development Programme.**

This online programme also includes short refresher courses and videos, including an expert insights on unconscious bias series. Contact HRTraining@vuw.ac.nz to arrange access.

If you have previously been on a recruitment panel or promotions committee, this [short video from the Royal Society Te Apārangi](#)  will provide a quick refresher.

There are also short courses and videos available through our Online Leadership Development Programme, including an expert insights series. Contact HRTraining@vuw.ac.nz to arrange access.

Checking your bias and the ladder of inference

It helps to be aware of your own bias. Once we accept that we will all quite naturally use subconscious mental shortcuts, then we can take the time to consider them and reflect on whether such implicit thought processes are inappropriately affecting the objectivity of our decision-making.

Using the Ladder of Inference teaches you to look at facts unbiased and not to judge too soon. It is a way to use your own convictions and experiences in a positive manner. The Ladder of Inference can be used in the three following ways:

1. Becoming aware of your own thoughts and reasoning.
2. Make clear to others how your own reasoning process works. This

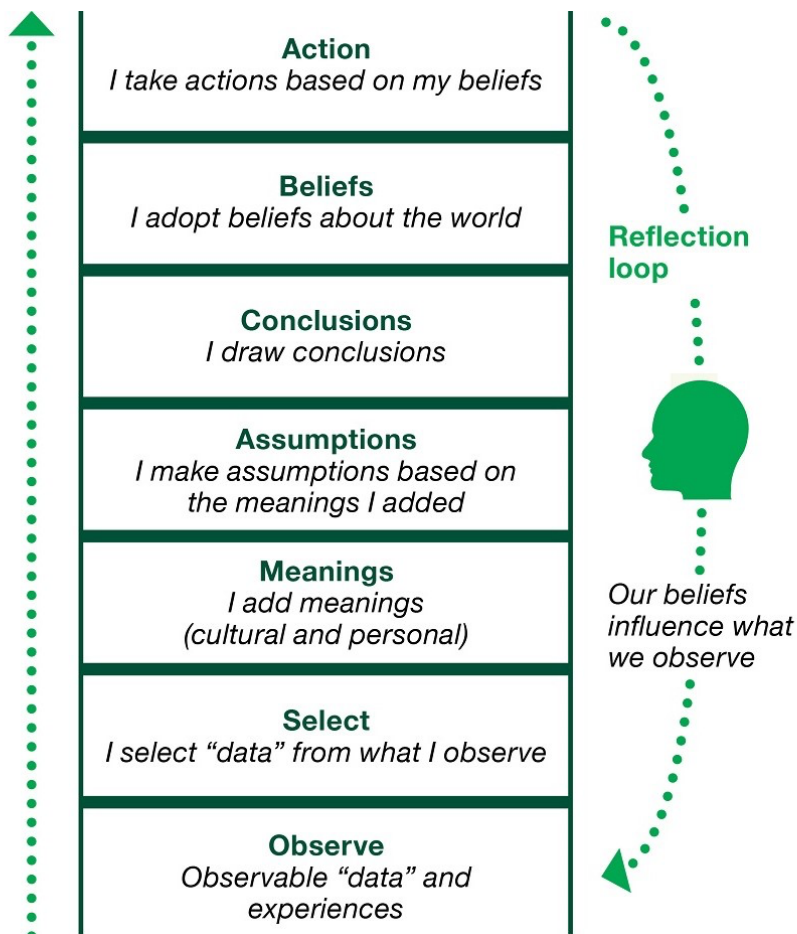
will allow others to have a better understanding of someone's motives.

3. Research the thought process of other people, by actively asking them about it.

The Ladder of Inference can be used in every stage of the thought process. Anyone can train themselves to do so, for example, by asking the following questions:

- Am I drawing the right conclusion?
- Why did I assume this?
- Is my conclusion based on facts?
- Why do I think this is the right thing to do?
- Can I do this in a different way?

It is also useful to identify the level of the ladder you are currently on. Sometimes it is smart to go back to a lower step. By asking yourself what you are thinking and why at each step, you will be able to analyse each step and no longer jump to premature conclusions.



► [Text description of image](#)

How to overcome biases

Making decisions about candidates is hard work and depends on being able to judge them entirely on their merits. Each and every one of us tends to believe that we are more fair, and less prejudiced than the average person.

We can help overcome these biases by:

- Acknowledging that we all have biases.
- Learning to recognise your own biases.
- Consciously acting as if there is no bias.
- Adopting slow thinking (take time to check your decisions, make sure you are not reacting from an emotional perspective, use the Ladder of Inference to check your thinking).

- Recognising your tendency to fill in blanks with your own assumptions.
- Being prepared to ask the right questions and look for information that contradicts your own perceptions.
- Taking time to gather additional information even if you think you know what you need to know.
- Making an effort to mix with people who are different from you and when you do, focus on what you have in common.

Action points

- When preparing for a committee meeting or interview, try to slow down the speed of your decision making.
- Reconsider the reasons for your decision, recognising that they may be post-hoc justifications.
- Question cultural stereotypes that seem truthful. Be open to seeing what is new and unfamiliar and increase your knowledge of other groups.
- Remember you are unlikely to be more and less prejudiced than the average person.
- You can detect unconscious bias more easily in others than in yourself so be prepared to call out bias when you see it.

You can download a summary of this information.

Additional resources

The [Neuroleadership Journal Breaking Bias \(PDF\)](#) presents a frame that lays out three easy steps for organisations to use to break bias

The [Royal Society Te Apārangi paper Unconscious Bias Briefing 2015 \(PDF\)](#) provides guidance specifically for recruitment panels and committees.

The Harvard Business Review, June 2011 article [Before you Make that Big Decision](#) discusses the biases which can creep into every strategic choice and how they can be avoided.

Sign in to watch a recording of the [Unconscious Bias webinar](#) facilitated by TELUS Health (formerly Benestar).