



# UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

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# WORKBOOK

A REINVENTING DIVERSITY PUBLICATION  
COOK ROSS INC.

## ABOUT COOK ROSS

Cook Ross Inc. is a nationally recognized, certified woman-owned consulting firm. We provide diversity, inclusion, and cultural competency solutions in training, consulting products, and excellence of service to hundreds of organizations across the United States, as well as ten countries around the globe.

Our methodology is built around a transformative approach to Diversity and Inclusion Consulting, and ReInventing Diversity for the 21st Century. This approach creates sustainable change in organizations by replacing race-based, U.S.-centric, “us versus them” diversity training with a systems model that explores globalism, cultural intelligence and cultural flexibility, inherent human tendency toward bias, and unconscious organizational patterns that exist that impact the way employees, vendors, and customers from different cultures, ages, and backgrounds all relate to each other.

## WHO IS THIS WORKBOOK FOR?

This workbook was written for both individual contributors and members of management teams. The process of education, exploration, self-analysis, and strategy is potentially transformational for all individuals and for the entire spectrum of talent management.

## HOW YOU CAN USE THIS WORKBOOK

You can use this workbook both individually and with a group:

- To develop a deeper understanding of the filters through which you view and interpret yourself and others
- To identify patterns in your own ways of evaluating, assessing, and working with other people
- To begin a dialogue for reflection of organizational values and norms, where those values and norms come from, and how they impact the quality of your business and talent management decisions.

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***An awareness of unconscious bias invites us to fundamentally rethink the way we approach Talent Management, Strategic Decision Making, Inclusion and Organizational Culture on a number of different levels...***

## INTRODUCTION: WHY SHOULD EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONS BE EXPLORING UNCONSCIOUS BIAS?

Imagine if an interview subject was rated higher simply because the interviewer had a warm drink in his or her hand rather than a cold one. Or if the subject was rated lower because he or she was sitting next to someone in the waiting room who was perceived to be overweight. Imagine if people were less likely to believe factual information if it happened to be communicated by somebody with an accent different from theirs or if the same resume was perceived to be more valid if the name sounded more mainstream than ethnic, or more “White” than “Black”? What if ideas were listened to less if they came from a woman instead of a man or somebody from an older or younger generation than the “mainstream” in the organization?

Most of us would probably say that an organization that makes talent management decisions in this way is doomed to mediocrity. And yet, all of these behaviors have been widely demonstrated in substantiated research, and they are but a small sampling of the hundreds of ways we make decisions every day in favor of one group, and to the detriment of others, without realizing we’re doing it.

Consider this: Less than 14% of American men are over six feet tall, yet almost 60% of corporate CEOs are over six feet tall. Less than 4% of American men are over six feet, two inches tall, yet more than 36% of corporate CEOs are over six feet, two inches tall.<sup>1</sup> Is this rational?

It seems not only unfair but patently absurd to choose a CEO because of his height, just like it is unfair and absurd to give employees lower performance evaluations solely because they are perceived to be overweight or to prescribe medical procedures to people more or less often because of their race or to treat the same people different ways because of the clothing they are wearing or even to call on boys more often than girls when they raise their hands in school.

Lately the concept of unconscious bias has come to the forefront of our work as diversity advocates because the dynamics of diversity are changing as we enter the 21st century. Our traditional paradigm has generally assumed that patterns of discriminatory behavior in organizations are conscious: that people who know better do the right thing and those who don’t cause bias. As a result, we have developed somewhat of a “good person/bad person” paradigm of diversity: a belief that good people are not biased but inclusive and that bad people are the biased ones. Consequently, one of the core drivers behind diversity and inclusion work, almost since its inception, has been to find the “bad people” and fix them; to eradicate bias. There is good reason for this. If we are going to create a just and equitable society, and if we are going to create organizations in which everybody can have access to their fair measure of success, it clearly is not consistent for some people to be discriminated against based on their identification with a particular group. And we also know that clear examples of conscious bias and discrimination still exist.

But what if, more times than not, people make choices that discriminate against one group and in favor of another, without even realizing that they are doing it, and, perhaps even more strikingly, against their own conscious belief that they are being unbiased in their decision-making? And what if we can make these kinds of unconscious decisions, even about people like ourselves?

The problem with the good person/bad person paradigm is two-fold: it virtually assures that both on a collective and on an individual basis we will never “do diversity right,” because every human being has bias of one kind or another. Secondly, it demonstrates a lack of understanding of a reality: human beings, at some level, need bias to survive. So, are we biased? Of course. Every one of us: toward some thing, some body, or some group.

The concept of the unconscious was of course Freud’s primary gift to the science of the mind. It drove the development of modern psychology. And yet, as behavioral psychology moved into the forefront during the ’50s, ’60s, and ’70s, the study of the unconscious became de-emphasized. Recent research, driven largely by our ability to manage huge quantities of data, and new exploratory techniques have given us an ability to not only observe the unconscious but also to track and quantify its impact.

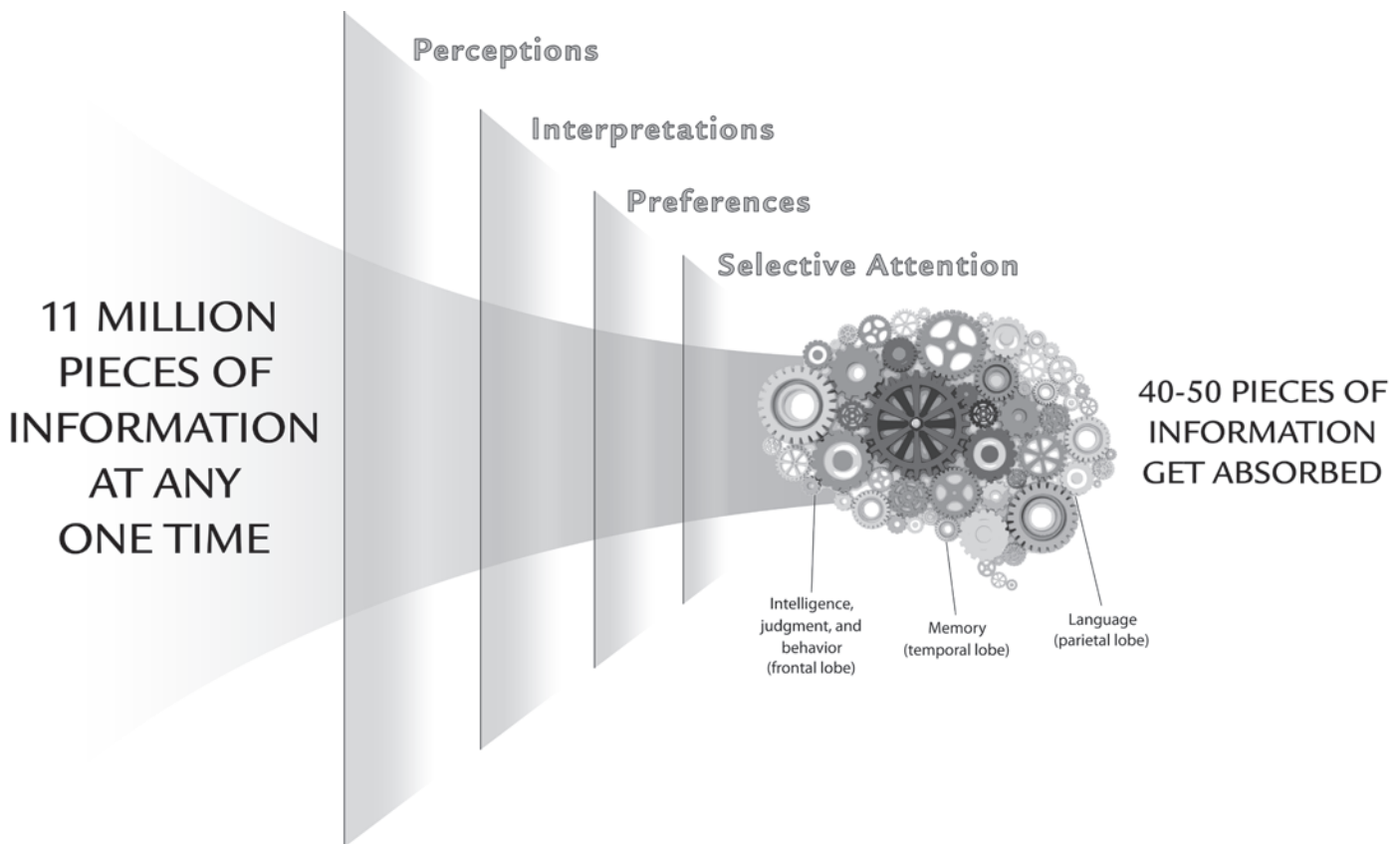
Bias gives us the ability to navigate a world in which we are constantly confronted with a cacophony of information and stimulus. For example, how long would we survive if we didn’t have a bias about how to act in relationship to big, heavy metal objects with wheels when we walked out on the street? If a person were to approach us with a knife in his or her raised hand, would we say, “Hmmm, I wonder what this person is going to do with that?” or would we react with bias and either defend ourselves or run?

Bias serves a purpose. We go out in the world every day and make decisions about what is safe or not, what is appropriate or not, etc. It is what psychologist Joseph LeDoux has suggested is an unconscious “danger detector” that determines whether or not some thing or one is safe before we can even begin to consciously make a determination.<sup>2</sup> When the object, animal, or person is assessed to be dangerous, a fear response, what has been called “fight or flight,” occurs. On a conscious level, we may correct a mistake in this “danger detector” when we notice it, but often, we simply begin to generate reasons to explain why it was accurate to begin with. We are generally convinced that our decisions are “rational,” but in reality, most human decisions are made emotionally, and we then collect or generate the facts to justify them. When we see something or someone that “feels” dangerous, we have already launched into action internally before we have even started “thinking.” Our sense of comfort or discomfort has already been engaged.

### THE BARGH STUDY<sup>3</sup>

What impacts your decision-making when you are conducting an interview? Could it be things that you don’t even think about? Yale University researchers evaluated results from interviews that were conducted by people holding cold and hot drinks and found that those holding hot drinks were more positive about the interviewee than those holding cold drinks. Rational? No. But what does a ‘warm smile’ indicate? Or a ‘cold heart’? We are influenced in ways that we don’t even realize!





From a survival standpoint, this is not a negative trait. It is a necessary one. We have all heard the axiom, “it is better to be safe than sorry,” and to a large degree that is true. If you sense something coming at your head, you duck. And if later you find out it was only a shadow of a bird flying by the window, better to have ducked and not needed to than to ignore the shadow and later find out it was a heavy object falling off the top shelf of the cabinet that would have hit you in the head!

Where people are concerned, these decisions are hard-wired into us. At earlier times in our history, determining who, or what, was coming up the path may have been a life-or-death decision. If it was a hostile animal or tribe member, you might die. Our minds evolved to make these decisions very quickly. And often before we even “thought about it.”

And so our fundamental way of looking at and encountering the world is driven by this “hard-wired” pattern of making decisions about others based on what feels safe, likeable, valuable, competent, etc. without us even realizing it. Freud knew that the unconscious was far vaster and more powerful than the conscious. He described it as somewhat like the iceberg: far more under the surface than above. And yet, recent research indicates that he may have underestimated it. As Timothy Wilson, a University of Virginia psychologist who has studied the subject extensively has written: “According to the modern perspective, Freud’s view of the unconscious was far too limited. When he said that consciousness is the tip of the mental iceberg, he was short of the mark by quite a bit—it may be more the size of a snowball on top of that iceberg.”<sup>4</sup>

Scientists estimate that we are exposed to as many as 11 million pieces of information at any one time and yet our brains can only functionally deal with 40 or so. So how do we filter out the rest? How is it that we can be walking down a busy street in New York City with a virtual ocean of stimulus in front of us and still look for a specific person or thing? How can we have a conversation with a friend in the middle of thousands of people at a rock concert? We do it by developing a perceptual lens that filters out certain things and lets others in, depending upon certain perceptions, interpretations, preferences, and, yes, biases that we



## THE IMPACT OF GENDER

*Testing shows that a positive implicit association for math and science favors males over females, beginning in 8th grade. This potentially impacts academic participation, achievement, and professional performance.*

have adapted throughout our lives. We can see this in some very mundane ways: if you or your partner was pregnant, did you notice how many more pregnant women you saw, all of a sudden? If you were looking for a new car, how often did you suddenly start to see that car in commercials and on the street? Our perceptive lens enables us to see certain things and miss certain things, depending on what the unconscious is focused on. It filters the evidence that we collect, generally supporting our already held points of view and disproving a point of view that we disagree with.

The most remarkable aspect of all of this is that as a result of these pre-established filters, we see, hear, and interpret things differently than other people might, or we might not even see them at all! In fact, our interpretations may be so far off that we have to question how we know what is real.

We make assumptions and determinations about what is real every moment of every day. We sort out those 11 million pieces of information and we see what we see, and we believe that what we see is real. Only occasionally do we realize how subjective those determinations are and how much they are impacted not

by what is in front of us but by what we interpret is in front of us, seen through our own lens on the world. Our perception is so deeply buried in our unconscious that even knowing it is there makes it difficult, or impossible, to see its impact on our thinking and on what we see as real.

What if these unconscious perceptions determine whether or not you will hire the best candidate for a job? Or make the best job assignment? Or give somebody a fair performance review? Or hire the right CEO?

Where diversity is concerned, this creates hundreds of seemingly irrational circumstances every day in which people make choices that seem to make no sense and seem only to be driven by overt prejudice. Hence, the studies that were discussed earlier that show that heavier employees get lower performance reviews; boys tend to be called on in school more often than girls; people with accents are less likely to be believed; and that the way people are dressed directly impacts the way they are responded to, and many others that show an impact on what people buy, who they vote for, how they tip, and even dramatically life-altering choices, like whether or not they sentence people to death.

Of course, there are still some cases where people are hateful, hurtful, and consciously biased. They still need to be watched for and addressed. But it is important to recognize that the existence of unconscious bias does not only apply to “them.” It applies to all of us.

Most of us know that there are some groups that we feel uncomfortable with, even at the same time we are castigating others for feeling uncomfortable with our own groups. Every person is biased against some group, even if the reason for their bias is because they think members of the group they don’t feel comfortable with are biased!

These are conscious patterns of discrimination and are problematic, but, again, they pale in comparison to the unconscious patterns that impact us every day. We are beginning to realize how much these unconscious perceptions govern many of the most important decisions we make. And they have an effect on the lives of many people in many ways.



## MENTAL MODELS

A math problem: Using one continuous line, change the following number from 9 to 6:

IX

Did you get it? It's actually quite simple. Look at the bottom of page 8 to see how it's done.

The natural tendency of the mind is to continue with the same "mental model" or set of rules that you were operating in. Since the number started as a Roman numeral, that is how we continue to think.

What are the mental models that limit your thinking? Some examples:

### Hand Dominance

How much difference does it make to be right-handed? Daniel Casasanto and Evangelia Chryssikou, at the Max Planck Institute of Psycholinguistics in the Netherlands, showed that people have a tendency to make choices toward their dominant side<sup>5</sup> (e.g., right-handed people will more often choose things on the right). **How clear are you about the factors that influence your choices?**

### Car Sales

Car salesmen seem to be strongly impacted by race and gender in the prices they offer customers for new cars. In a study by Ian Ayers, now at Yale Law School, white men were offered cars on average significantly lower than, in ascending order, white women, black women, and black men. Researchers were convinced that the salesmen had no idea there were patterns to their offers; in their minds they were simply trying to get the most they could from every sale.<sup>6</sup> **What are the assumptions that you make about the way different customers will respond to business interactions?**

### Names

What's in a name? Economists Sendhil Mullainathin and Mary Bertrand found that companies showed a strong preference when evaluating the exact same resume with different names. In the U.S., for example, archetypically white names were 50% more likely to be called back for interviews than archetypically African American names.<sup>7</sup> Similar patterns of favoring the dominant group names have been identified in Sweden and Singapore. **When you look at a resume, what are the things that may be impacting the way you evaluate it?**

### Body Size

Rice University researcher Mikki Hebl found that people were less positive about interview candidates when they had been simply sitting next to somebody who was perceived to be overweight in the waiting room!<sup>8</sup> **What factors are influencing you when you evaluate talent?**

### Accent

How much does a person's accent influence the credibility you give them? Two University of Chicago researchers found that people are less likely to believe factual information when it is delivered by someone whose accent is different than the dominant accent. Boaz Keysar and Shiri Lev-Ari discovered that even when test subjects were alerted to the phenomenon, they still were less likely to trust the veracity of people with strong accents other than their own.<sup>9</sup> **How does the accent of a co-worker or prospect impact your assessment of them?**

## ABOUT THIS WORKBOOK

We have produced this workbook to assist you in developing a deeper understanding of the way in which you make decisions. It is not our intention to tell you what decisions to make. Rather, our hope is that by learning to “turn a flashlight” on your often-hidden unconscious influences, you will make decisions that better serve you and your organization.

This workbook is designed to function as a tool to aid in the individual and organizational investigation of unconscious bias; that is, the unconscious beliefs that each of us have about members of various identity groups (e.g., race, gender, age, sexual orientation, etc.).

Unlike many study guides, this workbook does not simply repeat material found in a seminar. Instead, it extends the seminar content with discussion guides, exercises and background material. It can also function as a stand-alone guided learning experience. You will get as much out of using this tool as you are willing to invest in it. Think through this material. Examine your assumptions and challenge your beliefs. We guarantee it will assist you in developing a more inclusive perspective and actions that are more consistent with smart business decisions. The question we invite you to ask yourself is, “Do I really want to make decisions without knowing what’s driving them?”

# INDIVIDUAL EXPLORATION

## IDENTIFYING UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

This section is focused on supporting you in developing a deeper understanding of the filters through which you view and interpret yourself and others. These filters are created through our upbringing, the groups we belong to, and the experiences we have in our lives.

A self-assessment can be very useful in bringing to the surface your core operating beliefs and norms. When we can identify them, we have more power over how strongly they impact our business decisions and in what ways.

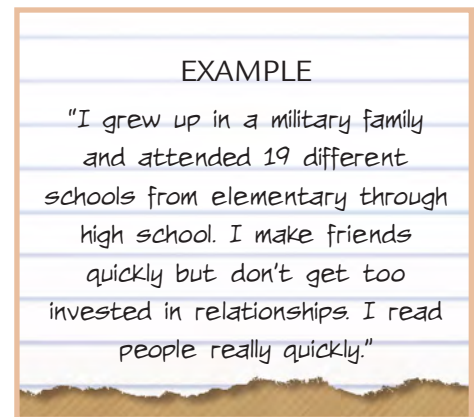
Record your initial responses as you ask yourself these questions. Doing this without looking for the right answer will provide you with more authentic responses rather than ones that are politically correct.

### UNCOVERING MY WORLD VIEW

#### #1 – INDIVIDUAL LEARNING

Select three key events in your life, as far back as you can remember, that may have impacted how you engage with the world.

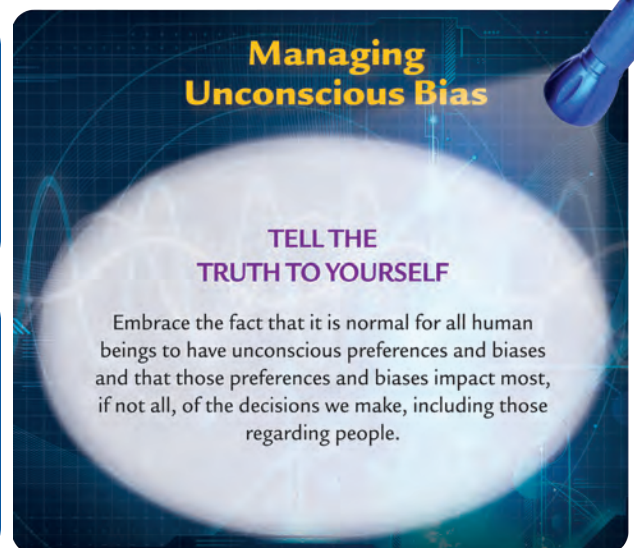
How might they impact your relationship to trust, safety, ways you relate to others or to authority, etc.? How might they impact the way you behave in the workplace? Record them here, along with their implication in the workplace.



1.

2.

3.



Was there a time when you recall feeling “different” from those around you for any reason (physical size, appearance, family status, being new in the community, etc.)?

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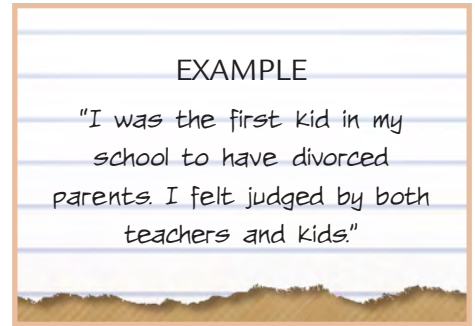
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How might you imagine that the experiences could have impacted how you see yourself and the formation of your personality (feel free to speculate)? What are the organizational implications of these differences? Do you relate more, less, or differently to people you perceive as “different”?

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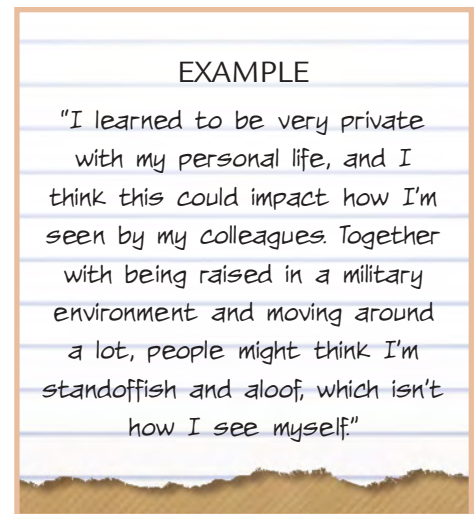
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## #2 – SOCIAL AND INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING

What was your (formal and informal) education path? What core values did you learn from education? How do these values shape your views today? When you interview others or learn about colleagues' education, what is your relationship to their education?

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