Dealing with personal and organisational bias?

Bias is the inclination or prejudice for or against one person or group, especially in a way considered to be unfair. The Equality Act covers the same groups that were protected by existing equality legislation – age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity. These protected characteristics are often the victim of bias.

Conscious Bias: Those that believe that bias is conscious argue that people are largely aware of their biases, attitudes, and beliefs, particularly when they concern stereotypes and prejudices. Such biases are an integral part of their self and social identity. They contend that people are not just conscious of their biases, but also quite proud of them as they have nurtured these beliefs through many years, often starting in childhood, when their parents, family, friends, and other well-meaning adults socialized the dominant cultural stereotypes into them. They strongly hold the belief that we are what we believe, and our identity and self-concept are engrained in our deepest personal biases.

Unconscious Bias: Others argue that bias is unconscious, often contradicting viewpoints we believe ourselves to hold and are inherent in everyone. This is backed with the explanation that the vast amount of information processed by our brain from our own experiences and what we read, hear or see in the media and from others result in the brain using shortcuts to speed up decision making especially when going through stress. Think of unconscious bias as stereotypes you've accidentally internalized; these are automatic preferences that influence your opinions unknowingly to your consciousness.

The Implicit Association Test developed because of collaboration among psychologists at Harvard University, the University of Virginia, and the University of Washington further illustrate that nobody is without bias. In addition, neuroimaging shows that decision-making automatically triggers specific regions of the brain responsible for unconscious processing, including those measured by the Implicit Association Test. MRI imaging showing which regions of the brain are activated during biased responses has illustrated the ability to visualise the occurrence of biased associations. Although, these research finding are credible, they have been under significant academic criticism for being weak predictors of actual behaviours.

Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) has reported that there are times when this sort of quick decision making built on unconscious bias is useful, for example if faced with a dangerous situation, however, it is not a good way to make decisions when dealing with others in our daily lives and at work.

Individual actions to combat bias

Two key action points will be to develop your emotional intelligence and social intelligence:

As defined by the HelpGuide "**Emotional intelligence** (otherwise known as emotional quotient or EQ) is the ability to understand, use, and manage your own emotions in positive ways to relieve stress, communicate effectively, empathize with others, overcome challenges and defuse conflict".

Emotional intelligence helps you build stronger relationships, connect with your feelings, turn intention into action, make informed decisions about what matters most to you, succeed at school, and work, and achieve your career and personal goals.

Emotional intelligence is commonly defined by four attributes as highlighted by HelpGuide:

1. Self-management: You can control impulsive feelings and behaviors, manage your emotions in healthy ways, take initiative, follow through on commitments, and adapt to changing circumstances.
2. Self-awareness: You recognize your own emotions and how they affect your thoughts and behavior. You know your strengths and weaknesses and have self-confidence.
3. Social awareness: You have empathy. You can understand the emotions, needs, and concerns of other people, pick up on emotional cues, feel comfortable socially, and recognize the power dynamics in a group or organization.
4. Relationship management: You know how to develop and maintain good relationships, communicate clearly, inspire and influence others, work well in a team, and manage conflict.

Social intelligence is defined by Psychology Today as "Intelligence that develops from experience with people and learning from success and failures in social settings. It is more commonly referred to as "tact," "common sense," or "street smarts." Psychology today describes critical traits for people with high Social Quotient:

1. They can carry on conversations with a wide array of people and verbally communicate with appropriate and tactful words, also known as "social expressiveness skills."
2. They are adept at learning how to play different social roles, and well-versed at the informal rules of the game that are the creed of social interaction.
3. They are known to be excellent listeners. They know how to efficiently analyze what makes people tick by paying attention to what they are saying and how they're behaving.
4. Not only do they know how to learn to play different social roles; they put those skills into practice to feel at ease with many different types of personalities.
5. They take care of the impression of themselves they exude on other people. This is the hardest skillset because it requires "…a delicate balance between managing and controlling the image you portray to others and being reasonably "authentic" and letting others see the true self."

Dealing with personal and organisational bias?

Organisational actions to combat bias

1. Develop a culture that dampen bias and promote diversity as a trigger for spurring innovation.
2. Empower employees to report bias and take immediate action to address such bias.
3. Review the organisational structure to ensure that all protected characteristics as mentioned in equality act are represented in the management team and given adequate power to contribute.
4. Establish specific bias metrics (balanced board members, inclusion index survey, etc.) that will illustrate a change in the organisation, engage employees in bias training, ensure that there is quarterly review of the training until the bias metrics are at par with the target set by the organisations.

LeanIn covered some key bias to focus on such as:

   a. Performance bias: Do you hire a certain sect of people more based on their past performance while others are hired based on their future performance?
   b. Attribution bias: Do you blame others for their mistakes than you appraise them for their achievement.
   c. Likeability bias: How do you react to a sect assertive or communal approach to leadership?
   d. Maternal bias: Do you penalise any sect for their parental choice and not the other?
   e. Double discrimination/Intersectional bias: Does your organisation tend to connect more to people with the same look, belief, background, and favourable position of power?

5. Following successful training and metrics attainment; signages discouraging bias should be as commonplace as heath/safety signages in the workplace as a reminder of the culture of the organisation.
6. Social media is a critical part of our everyday life, organisations need to promote messages discouraging bias on their social media pages to strengthen organisational values
7. Eliminating bias is not just the right thing to do, it is the smart thing to do as employees are more committed and work harder when they feel included. This will make our organisations benefit from tapping everyone's talent and ideas leading to better performance.

In conclusion, we all need to take responsibility for our actions, resist from taking spontaneous decision about other people without getting to know them personally and be willing to speak up whenever we witness bias by others. This is crucial as most people exhibiting bias are often ignorant of the impact of what they did, except if that is pointed out to them especially from someone they respect and have some commonalities.

This resource was created by Dr Ifeyinwa Rita Kanu, MCIWEM, FRSA, AFHEA, Founder and Director of IntelliDigest Ltd (www.IntelliDigest.com). Ifeyinwa is a married female, a mother, a working class, an engineer, an innovator, an entrepreneur, black skin coloured and a Christian who has lived and breathed bias in all its forms and pleased to share her skills and knowledge for addressing bias personally and at work place.