

# UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

# IDENTIFYING AND CONFRONTING IMPLICIT BIAS

by Mary Bergin

When walking into a restaurant, do you make sure your hands are clearly visible? That your tone of voice is not too loud? That you explain yourself without being asked, that you're waiting for a friend?

This type of vigilance is business as usual for customers who feel a sense of prejudice because of the way they look. Sometimes expressions of bias are overt—done knowingly and openly. Much more is implicit—not conveyed directly or a knee-jerk reaction that happens subconsciously.

You may not realize the range of subtle actions and reactions that are based on a person's appearance, but they indeed leave an impression on the employee or customer who is made to feel different.

Implicit bias can be about race or ethnicity, gender or age, weight or disability, tattoos or religious jewelry—any aspect of identity that seems foreign to you. We all grow up with biases, but unchecked perceptions, presumptions and actions can have an adverse impact on a business.

Body language, hurtful words and behaviors—microaggressions—are what send the wrong message. Deborah Biddle of The People Company LLC, Verona, refers to microaggressions as “these all-to-familiar behavioral and verbal indignities that convey insulting, unwelcoming and sometimes intimidating comments about race, religion, sexual orientation, socio-economic status and gender.”

## UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

A study by the nonprofit Center for Talent Innovation concludes that bias impacts retention and impedes innovation. Employees who feel bias at work are more likely to look for another job within a year or withhold ideas to improve the workplace.

As for the customer, who is eager to return to a business that makes them feel uncomfortable? Word about hasty presumptions can escalate and travel quickly, especially in this era of cell phones and social media.

Consider the Starbucks blunder of 2018, after a customer's video in Philadelphia showed the arrest of two black men. They were handcuffed while sitting inside a Starbucks, waiting for a friend to arrive before placing their order. A white manager called police. The video went viral.

Then came public protests, national news coverage and a public apology from Starbucks CEO Kevin Johnson. More than 8,000 Starbucks closed for a day, so 175,000 employees could attend four hours of racial bias instruction.

Biases often are triggered by subconscious experiences, says Andre Howell of the Multicultural Foodservice and Hospitality Alliance (MFHA), and

*continued on page 20*



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they are likely to become evident in widespread ways during foodservice work.

“A waiter might seat a group of young guests far away from an elderly couple, assuming they will be too loud and lively for the more mature guests,” Howell says. “Another example could be a waiter being reluctant to provide optimum service to African American guests, assuming they may not tip as well as other guests.”

Biddle says bias exists in every work environment, and there are consequences. “It interferes with good management decision-making, affecting everything from hiring, promotions, layoffs and teambuilding to advertising, marketing, product development and product placement,” she explains. “It impacts our thought processes and can cloud our judgment.”

## AT THE SOURCE OF IT

Howell says bias is a part of daily life, a part of being human, and often based on “how and where we grew up, our exposure (or lack of it) to individuals different than ourselves, where we went to school, our parents’ values and how they imposed their values on us.”

From Kevin Zabel of the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, who conducts research on how implicit attitudes affect behavior: “Humans cannot help but group things together. Humans group people together, for instance, based on the degree to which they have similar characteristics, are in the same proximity, etc.” A part of this is biological: “Even though the human brain is processing hundreds of bits of information from all five senses per second, we are consciously aware of only a very small part of what is being processed by sensory systems at a more automatic level.”

When we start to think that all who share the same features are the same, Zabel says “it sets the stage for stereotyping and persistence of negative stereotypes that are socially learned.”

He believes much of implicit bias is socially learned and environmental. “Parents, teachers, siblings, peers, social media, television, video games—all are powerful sources of social



## A NEW COLLABORATION

“Understanding Bias in Restaurants” is a new ServSafe Workplace online training module to help employees and managers identify unconscious bias. It is available in English and Spanish.

Development of the 30-minute segments (one for managers, the other for employees) was a collaboration of the National Restaurant Association and the Multicultural Foodservice & Hospitality Alliance.

The module for employees defines unconscious bias, explains the impact of it on interactions with guests and co-workers, and suggests ways to become more aware of others’ perspectives.

The module for managers provides advice to handle situations in which bias occurs, to promote an inclusive workplace and to minimize the impact on business when difficult situations arise. [servsafe.com/servsafe-workplace](http://servsafe.com/servsafe-workplace)

learning. Interactions with these sources not only reflect society’s prevailing implicit attitudes, but also help reinforce them as well.”

Biases start to develop at a young age and emerge during middle childhood, say researchers at the University of California at San Francisco. As we age, we gravitate to others like ourselves.

“Consider those from whom we seek advice and those we trust most,” Biddle suggests. Our closest advisors and most trusted colleagues, she asserts, are “the least diverse. They more often than not think like we do, are the same ethnicity, are of the same or similar culture, have similar upbringing, education and work experience, are in the same age category and hold similar beliefs.”

That means most of us have a “bias toward sameness” and are not likely to make progress “in hiring or promoting diversity, or developing new products, creating new processes, creating inclusive work environments and reaching a broader client base.”

The challenge: Broaden your circle to involve people whose ideas, perspectives and cultures seem alien to your own.

## ONLINE HELP TO IDENTIFY BIAS

**Implicit Association Test** – developed at Harvard University to help uncover the test taker’s unconscious biases. [implicit.harvard.edu](http://implicit.harvard.edu)

**GapJumpers** – blind job auditions, based on a skills-based test. Customers include Google. [gapjumpers.me](http://gapjumpers.me)

**Textio** – spots biases in job descriptions and recommends how to strengthen job language. Used by Twitter, Starbucks. [textio.com](http://textio.com)

**Gender Decoder** – lessens the gender bias in job ads by flagging hot-button words. [gender-decoder.katmatfield.com](http://gender-decoder.katmatfield.com)

Source: [Recruiterbox.com](http://Recruiterbox.com)

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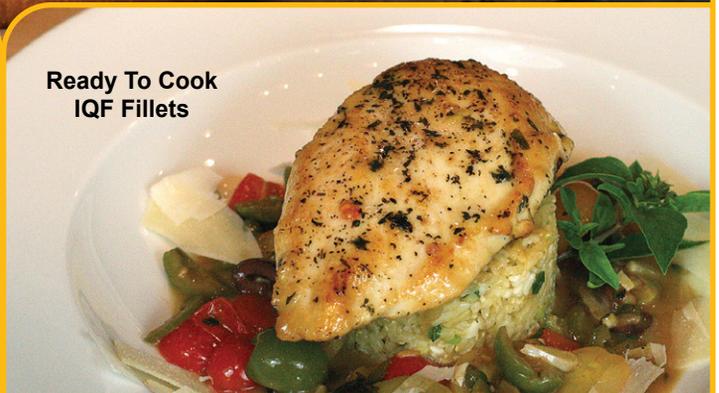
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## TOOLS FOR CHANGE

Knowing that bias is a part of being human doesn't excuse us, and there are ways to address potential repercussions. New collaborations from Howell's MFHA and the National Restaurant Association deepen workplace training opportunities for all employees. Online tools help identify biases. (See sidebars.)

Being aware of personal biases is an important step in addressing the snap judgments that we tend to make about others. We need to process our own backstories before identifying changes we want to make when interacting with people who are different than us.

"The challenge is to first acknowledge that reactions are indeed biases and, more importantly, to understand the adverse impact and potential alienation biases can create," Howell says. "Failure to acknowledge and establish strategies to combat unconscious biases will lead to negative interactions with customers, co-workers and in personal relationships."



## HOW TO BEAT BIAS

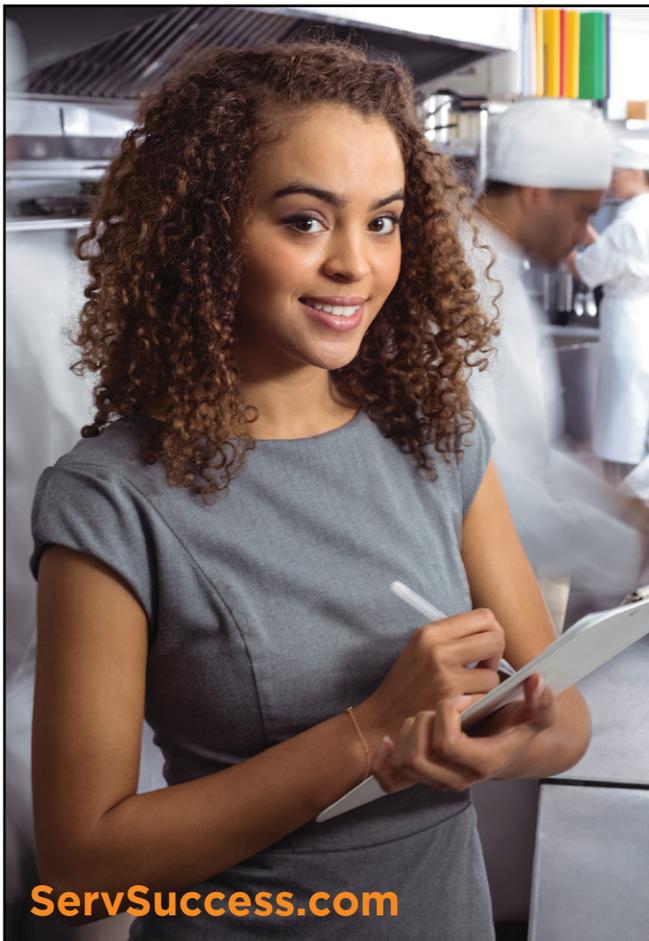
- ▲ Model the behaviors you expect employees to exhibit.
- ▲ Have open and honest conversations about ways bias shows up at work and affects it.
- ▲ Define what dignity and respect mean at work.
- ▲ Instill a culture of dignity and respect.
- ▲ Value and respect all employees.
- ▲ Hold each person responsible for the desired behavior.
- ▲ Hold people accountable for exclusive, disruptive and divisive behavior.
- ▲ Acknowledge and appreciate employees who exemplify respectful, inclusive behavior.
- ▲ Conduct continuous employee training and development.

Source: Deborah Biddle, The People Company LLC, [tpl-co.com](http://tpl-co.com)

## Give your employees a certified reason to stay.

**The average cost of recruiting and training a new employee is almost \$2,000 per hire.** Give your employees a reason to stay by providing them with the training and certification they want and need.

ServSuccess is a new program from the National Restaurant Association that gives restaurant employees a career path to train and grow.



## TIPS FOR A POSITIVE WORKPLACE

- ▲ Create an open environment, so workers feel comfortable about communicating problems.
- ▲ Tailor management training so it allows important, but difficult conversations to occur.
- ▲ Be aware of perceptions that are a part of terminology. Examples: customers vs. guests, team vs. employees.
- ▲ Understand the communities that you serve. That includes the employee as well as the guest.
- ▲ Make training easy to remember. Use visuals and dissect material into small chunks.
- ▲ Seek solid sources for training.

Source: *Nation's Restaurant News*



Internally, this work includes the hiring process. Focus on skills and qualifications instead of demographics and personality traits when writing job descriptions and interviewing. Some organizations bias-proof resumes by blanking out names or other cultural identifiers.

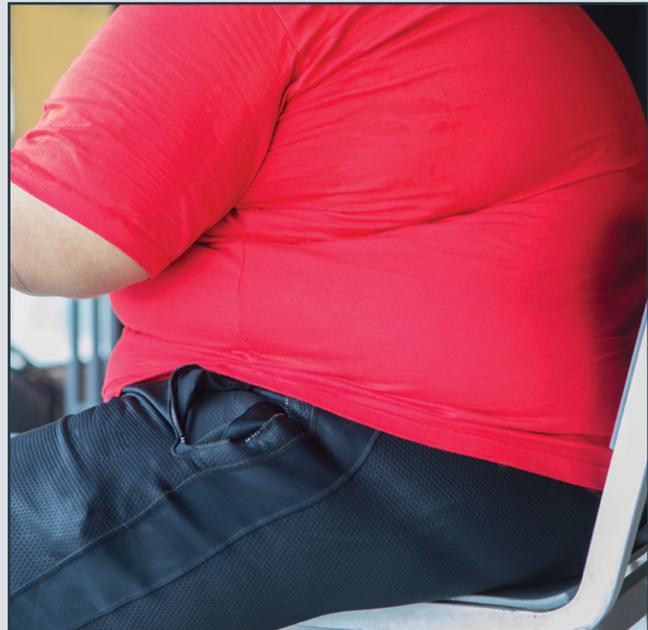
These efforts are widening to encompass myriad professions and educational settings. Gov. Tony Evers in late 2019 signed an executive order that makes equity and inclusion training mandatory for all state of Wisconsin employees. The order also created the Governor's Advisory Council on Equity and Inclusion.

At UW-Madison, the Our Wisconsin program addresses prejudices. First-year students take two-hour workshops to see how their backgrounds and life experiences affect their perception of people unlike them.

In 2019, the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at Ohio State University made available free, online lessons about implicit bias. The material is designed for K-12 educators but accessible to anyone. [kirwaninstitute.osu.edu](http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu)

In his workshops, Zabel favors a reframing of training and education, to focus on motivation to control prejudice, in part to reduce defensiveness. "If a person is motivated to control prejudicial reactions and has the opportunity to correct their implicit attitudes," he says, "then they often do so and behave in a more positive way."

Angela Russell of CUNA Mutual Group told Madison's *InBusiness* magazine that the process of building an inclusive workplace is like learning a new muscle memory. "For example, if you play an instrument and are into music, you are not going to go to one music lesson and become a pianist. You have to go through multiple lessons and in between lessons, you have to practice." **WR**



## OVERWEIGHT BIAS

About 70 percent of white Americans have at least a slight implicit bias against black Americans, reports Kevin Zabel, UW-La Crosse researcher. He says the percentage can be even higher for the extremely overweight.

Zabel says, "motivation to control prejudice toward overweight individuals tends to be very low." Why? We incorrectly presume weight is totally in a person's control, he says, and that "overweight individuals violate traditional American values pertaining to self-discipline and work ethic."

Effectively educating employees that weight is more complicated than a personal choice can help motivate them to control negative verbal and non-verbal behaviors toward overweight customers and co-workers.