

Making Fair Decisions

Unconscious bias training may have raised your awareness about what your personal biases are, and this awareness now needs to transform your behaviour and the process you follow when making decisions at work that impact others. We know that our brains rely more on biases when we need to make quick decisions, are under pressure, are tired and when we are working with a team/panel (where group think can come into play).

Think about how those factors might influence the outcome of Recruitment, Probation review, Redundancy, Promotions, Pay Relativity, Disciplinary and other processes. By being deliberate in our actions, it is possible to make decisions that are fair.



Goals. Set fairness as a goal at the outset to everyone involved in the process. Say to yourself, “It is important that my/our decision is accurate and fair”. That simple reminder is often enough to reduce potential bias. This will help you to be more objective and less reliant on stereotypes and preconceived thoughts. Consciously identify your biases and any possible conflict of interest at the start of the process. How may these impact your decision making? What steps can you take to mitigate against these? An excellent principle to follow in all situations is to consciously commit to being fair and respectful to everyone you encounter, whether in person or on paper.

Monitor the outcome of these processes to see if any patterns emerge. For example, you might find that if a candidate previously worked with Prof X at X university in the past then they end up being appointed to your team too. Question patterns when they emerge. Why is this happening? What are the possible implications of this pattern (e.g. risk of not having a diverse team)?



Process. Follow the correct College processes. Although you might think they are cumbersome or that you know them inside out, the process is there to guide you in making important decisions. Take the time to use them and ask for advice if anything is not clear. You need to give yourself enough time to follow the process as taking shortcuts is not appropriate here.

While undertaking the processes mentioned above, keep records of the decisions you make and the justification for them. Providing a justification will help you to focus on the ‘real’ reason for the decision. If a decision is objectively justified, you should be able to clearly articulate the reasoning behind it. This will also help you to defend your decision against challenge.



Teamwork. Having a diverse team or panel will reduce the likelihood of group think and increase the likelihood of making a fair decision that is free from bias. Our instincts lead us to put other people into categories based on their gender, age, race, cultural background, educational background, title, accent, experience etc. We can jump to conclusions and make judgements about them based on our own background, past experiences, culture etc. We are wired to feel safer/more comfortable with people whom we perceive as being familiar to us and not so much with those we

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think are different. These subconscious biases can stop people working in teams or on panels from being genuinely open to other people's views.

Bear in mind the assumptions that you may be making about fellow team/panel members (e.g. a young person cannot have the required experience of a subject) and test whether these are really true. Ask questions to show interest rather than shutting ideas down and look for ways to explore the pros and cons of all ideas, not just yours! This is the basis of creating an inclusive environment in which people can be themselves and everyone feels that their contributions are valued.

Where your team/panel lacks diversity, there is a need to be particularly mindful of group think. Take time in making your decision, especially if you all appear to initially agree. Confirmation bias leads us to seek out and weight information which confirms what we already thought, so it is important to look for information that goes against our initial instincts. You could have someone in the team/panel play 'devil's advocate' and argue the opposite point of view – you may change your mind!



Challenge/Question those who are not being fair. Use the [4 Ds](#) to decide on a strategy that you are comfortable with and don't rely on someone else dealing with it. It is likely that colleagues are not aware that they may be being biased/unfair or dismissive and so respectfully raising this should be welcomed by those with good intentions.

You can also invite challenge when making decisions and actively ask, what might I be missing? Does anyone have an alternative idea? Making this a regular part of decision-making exercises will mean those involved are less likely to take challenge personally and result in outcomes that have been tested through the diversity lens.



5 Actions. The Royal Society provides this useful summary of actions that can be taken when making decisions:

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

References:

<https://royalsociety.org/-/media/policy/Publications/2015/unconscious-bias-briefing-2015.pdf>

<https://pearnkandola.com/diversity-and-inclusion-hub/bias/five-ways-to-reduce-bias-in-decision-making/>