



LESSON 2

UNCONSCIOUS BIAS & INTERVIEWING BARRIERS: HOW SMART PEOPLE MAKE BAD HIRING DECISIONS

Introduction: The Hidden Traps of the Mind

Even the most well-intentioned interviewer is susceptible to the influence of unconscious bias. These are mental shortcuts that our brains use to make quick judgments and decisions, but they can often lead to unfair assessments and poor hiring choices. These biases are not a reflection of our character; they are a fundamental part of human psychology. The key is to become aware of these hidden traps and to develop strategies to mitigate their impact on our hiring decisions.

The Most Common Interviewing Barriers and How to Overcome Them

Barrier #1: The Leniency & Stringency Trap

This trap involves swinging to one of two extremes: being too easy on every candidate or being too hard.

- **The Leniency Trap:** This is when you rate everyone too highly, often because you are in a rush to fill a position or you are overly influenced by a candidate's personality. This can lead to hiring someone who is likable but lacks the necessary skills.

- **The Stringency Trap:** This is the opposite problem – being overly critical and holding candidates to an impossible standard. This can lead to a long and fruitless search, leaving the position vacant for months.
- **The Solution:** Use a structured scoring rubric with clear, objective criteria. This forces you to evaluate all candidates against the same standard and compare them to the job requirements, not to a mythical “perfect” employee.

Barrier #2: The Halo & Horn Effect

This is a cognitive bias where a single positive or negative trait can overshadow everything else about a candidate.

- **The Halo Effect:** This is when one great quality (e.g., they went to a prestigious university, they speak three languages) makes you see the candidate through rose-colored glasses and overlook their weaknesses.
- **The Horn Effect:** This is when one negative quality (e.g., they arrived five minutes late, they have a typo on their resume) taints your entire perception of the candidate and causes you to dismiss their strengths.
- **The Solution:** Evaluate each competency separately. Use behavioral questions to gather multiple examples of a candidate’s performance in different areas. This will give you a more balanced and accurate picture of their abilities.

Barrier #3: The Central Tendency Error

This is the tendency to rate all candidates as “average” or “okay” to avoid making a tough decision. The danger of this approach is that it causes you to miss out on exceptional candidates and overlook serious red flags.

- **The Solution:** Force yourself to make a choice. Use a scoring system that requires you to rank candidates and clearly articulate the reasons for your ratings. If you find yourself rating everyone as a “3 out of 5,” challenge yourself to identify the specific strengths and weaknesses that differentiate each candidate.

Barrier #4: The "Similar to Me" Bias

This is the tendency to favor candidates who are similar to us in terms of their background, personality, and interests. This is one of the most common and dangerous biases, as it can lead to a lack of diversity on your team.

- **The Solution:** Involve a diverse group of interviewers in your hiring process. This will help to ensure that you are getting a variety of perspectives and that you are not just hiring people who are clones of yourself.

This is the tendency to look for information that confirms our existing beliefs and to ignore information that contradicts them. If you have a good first impression of a candidate, you may be more likely to ask them easy questions and to interpret their answers in a positive light.

- **The Solution:** Use a structured interview process where you ask every candidate the same set of questions. This will help you to gather consistent, comparable data and to make a more objective decision.

The Power of Awareness and Structure

Overcoming unconscious bias is not about trying to eliminate it completely; that's impossible. It is about becoming aware of our biases and putting systems and structures in place to mitigate their impact. By using a structured, behavioral-based interview process with a diverse group of interviewers and a consistent scoring rubric, you can significantly reduce the influence of bias and make fairer, more accurate, and more effective hiring decisions.



ACTIVITY: UNCOVER YOUR UNCONSCIOUS BIASES

Time needed: 30 minutes

What You'll Do

Take the Implicit Association Test (IAT) to discover hidden biases. Learn how these biases might affect your hiring decisions and what to do about them.

Why This Matters

- **Everyone has unconscious biases.** Even people who believe in fairness.
- **The problem:** You can't fix biases you don't know you have.
- **Example:** You might unconsciously favor candidates who remind you of yourself, or judge resumes differently based on names alone.
- **Research shows:** Identical resumes with different names get different callback rates. Candidates named "James" get more interviews than those named "Jamal" - same qualifications, different outcome.

Instructions

Step 1: Take the IAT (15 minutes)

Go to: implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html

Choose ONE test related to hiring:

- Race IAT
- Gender-Career IAT
- Age IAT
- Skin-tone IAT
- Weight IAT

Important:

- Take it seriously and answer honestly
- There are no "right" answers
- Your results are private
- It takes 10-15 minutes

Download the reflection worksheet before you start.

Step 2: Record Your Results (5 minutes)

After completing the test, write down:

Which test did you take?

Your result: (Example: "Slight automatic preference for young people over old people")

Were you surprised? Yes / No

Why or why not?

Step 3: Connect to Hiring (10 minutes)

Answer these reflection questions honestly:

① How might this bias show up in your hiring?

Example:

- "I might judge older candidates as 'less tech-savvy' without evidence"
- "I might assume women are less assertive in leadership roles"
- "I might favor candidates who went to the same university as me"

Your answer:

② **Think of your last 3 hires. Did they all share similar characteristics?**

Consider: Age, gender, education background, previous companies, personality type

What did you notice?

③ **Describe a time you might have let bias influence a hiring decision.**

Be honest. We all do it. Example: "I rejected a candidate because they seemed 'too quiet' but I never tested if quiet people perform worse in the role."

Your example:

④ **What will you do differently in your next interview?**

Write 3 specific actions: 1. 2. 3.

Examples:

- "Remove names from resumes during initial screening"
- "Use the same questions for all candidates"
- "Wait 24 hours before making gut-feeling decisions"

Self-Check

Review your reflections:

- ✓ Did you take the test honestly?
- ✓ Did you connect results to real hiring situations?
- ✓ Were you honest about past biases?
- ✓ Are your action steps specific and doable?
- ✓ Did you avoid being defensive about your results?

Common Reactions (All Normal)

"This test is wrong. I'm not biased." → Remember: Unconscious bias doesn't mean you're a bad person. It means you're human.

"I already knew I had this bias." → Great! Now you have a plan to counter it.

"This is uncomfortable to admit." → That discomfort means you're learning and growing.

Action Plan Template

In my next interview, I will: _____

Before the interview: _____

During the interview: _____

After the interview: _____

Example:

- Before: Remove candidate names and photos from resumes
- During: Ask every candidate the exact same first 3 questions
- After: Use a scoring rubric instead of gut feeling

Submit Your Work

- Which IAT test you took
- Your result (copy the exact wording)
- All 4 reflection questions answered
- Your 3-step action plan for future interviews

Note: Your results are confidential. Only submit what you're comfortable sharing.