

Conscious Decision-Making

BY KENSTON HENDERSON SR.

Become Aware of Your Inner Storyteller

Citywide Training and Development, a division of the City of Columbus, Ohio, works with organizations to help them understand and identify the strong biases that are woven through the organization from the top down. The city does this because city leaders understand that implicit bias is a serious problem. When people don't address their unconscious bias, they make serious decisions based on thought processes that are ineffective at best—and sometimes harmful. Columbus doesn't do this because its people are more biased than other cities; its leadership simply realizes that all people are biased.

Here's the big news: If you are human, you have biases. I have them, you have them, we all have them. Implicit biases are attitudes and stereotypes that we unconsciously use to fill in gaps based on our experiences, and they help us make decisions. Biases reside in our deep subconscious, and they aren't all bad—but some are faulty, and we have to address them because they affect the decisions we make, both professionally and personally.

Everyone reading this article has had different life experiences. We're all different. Something that may upset me may not upset you. A decision that I would make about a situation won't necessarily be the same decision that you would make. People are passionate about their life experiences and what they know to be true.

This quote from Rabbi Shemuel ben Nachmani says it all: "We don't see things as they are. We see them as we are."



Filling in the Gaps

Implicit bias causes us to fill in gaps in stories with our own life experiences. Unfortunately, those details may not be true, which means that our judgments aren't always based on reality.

Implicit bias refers to attitudes and stereotypes, which can be favorable or unfavorable. Here's a personal example. I live in Columbus, Ohio, and I went to Ohio State University. Our college football team is the Ohio State Buckeyes, and the University of Michigan—which we refer to as the team up north—are our rivals. And I confess that I have an unfavorable bias against the Michigan Wolverines, and that bias has the potential to affect my decision-making in areas other than college football. If I were looking at two resumes, one from an Ohio State graduate and the other from a University of Michigan graduate, I might unintentionally let my bias lead me to reject the person from the University of Michigan, even if they have more experience and a better skill set than the person who went to Ohio State. Do I really want to let my bias toward a college football team affect my decision-making regarding the best candidate for this job? No, I don't.

To avoid this kind of bias, we have to look within ourselves for any type of negative biases that might affect our decision-making as it relates to our customers, coworkers, bosses, or members of our communities.

Types of Bias

One of the many different types of bias is **confirmation bias**, which is basically the phenomenon of ignoring whatever counters your existing views and only paying attention to information that confirms what you already believe.

Gender bias is another one we tend to see on a day-to-day basis. An example of gender bias is male nurses. Some people believe that nurses should be women; they will refuse to accept services from a nurse who is a man and ask for another nurse. This bias exists because society has told us, from TV shows to the interactions that we've had over the years, that nurses are female—although of course this isn't true.

Another type of bias is called **beauty bias**. People have a tendency to think that the most attractive individuals will be most successful—although this bias can go the other way; you might think that attractive people aren't intelligent.

The next bias type is **racial bias**. An article from healthychildren.org states that a baby's brain can notice

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race-based differences as early as six months.¹ By age two to four, children can internalize racial bias. And by age 12, many children become set in their beliefs, giving parents a decade to mold the learned process in a way that decreases racial bias and helps improve children's understanding of people who look different than them. The same article suggests that parents can confront their own racial biases by identifying and correcting their own racially biased thoughts, feelings, and actions; having a wide and culturally diverse social network; traveling and exposing their children to other communities; and getting involved in their children's school to advocate for fair treatment of racially marginalized groups.

Addressing Implicit Bias

To start addressing biases in the workplace, begin with self-reflection to learn about your biases. It might help to ask your colleagues how you come across to them. Identify leaders within your organization who can help take the initiative to the entire organization. Initiate open, honest dialogue in the office, at lunchtime, at a meeting, or somewhere you can have

¹ Dr. Ashaunta Anderson and Dr. Jacqueline Douge, "Talking to Children about Racial Bias," healthychildren.org.




Kenston Henderson, Sr. speaks at *Connecting the Dots: Who's Got Next?* in Atlanta, Georgia.

a winning necessary conversation. If you don't have a training and development leadership team, please reach out to a consultant or CTD for assistance.

The City of Columbus-Citywide Training and Development Commitment

The City of Columbus Citywide Training and Development division will continue to have conversations about implicit bias, and the city is dedicated to giving staff the tools they need to do it. This way, they can really think about their decisions

and hold themselves accountable. Having the tools to address implicit bias allows you to make better decisions and to truly value the employees in your organization.

Columbus Business First—which recognizes inclusive organizations and individuals in Central Ohio—honored the city as a diversity champion organization. 

***Kenston Henderson, Sr.** is the enterprise training and development coordinator for the Department of Citywide Training and Development for the City of Columbus, Ohio. For more information, go to columbus.gov/hr/citywide-training/.*



You can also watch Kenston's TedX talk on how to have conversations at work and why they're important. It's available at ted.com/talks/kenston_henderson_sr_can_we_talk.