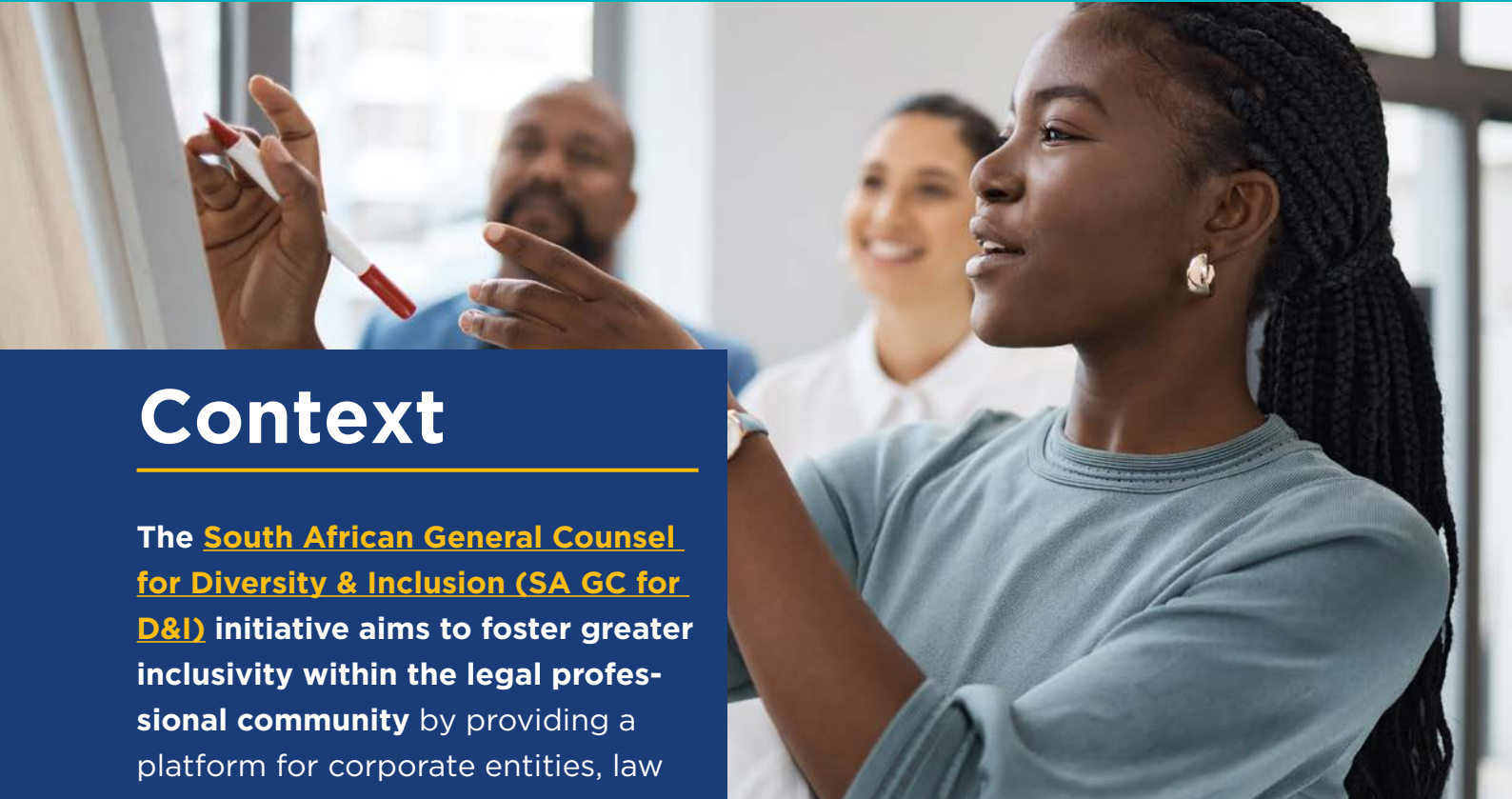


Unconscious bias training workshop template





Context

The **South African General Counsel for Diversity & Inclusion (SA GC for D&I)** initiative aims to foster greater inclusivity within the legal professional community by providing a platform for corporate entities, law firms, groups of advocates, and other legal sector players to engage on critical diversity issues.

A key aspect of the initiative is the **creation of working groups** to facilitate comprehensive and multi-stakeholder conversations around critical themes linked to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within the South African legal fraternity.

These working groups discuss topics proposed and voted on by members and partners to the initiative.

Each working group is tasked with using the discussions to create an output intended as a public good resource for those wanting to enhance DEI. This document is such an output and we encourage readers to share it with others in the South African legal fraternity who may benefit from its content.

This particular document is the fruit of the collaborative efforts of the “Unpacking and addressing unconscious bias” working group, which concluded its work in late 2024.

The SA GC for D&I gratefully acknowledges the efforts of all of those who took part in these working group discussions and thanks their organisations for allowing them the time to do so.

The discussions within the working groups adhere to the “Chatham House” rule, ensuring the anonymity of individual contributors to the dialogue. For further information or to become part of the SA GC for D&I and its current or future working groups, visit www.sagcdi.co.za.

Document user guide (1/2)

What is “unconscious bias”?

Unlike conscious biases, **unconscious (or implicit) biases are views and opinions that we hold which we are not consciously aware of.** They are automatically activated, typically operate outside conscious awareness, and affect our everyday behaviour and decision-making. Our unconscious biases are influenced by our background, culture, context, and personal experiences.

What is this document about?

This document provides an approach to helping people in your team and/or organisation understand and address their own unconscious biases. In particular, it has been, designed to help:

- Increase awareness of unconscious bias;
- Understand the negative impact of unconscious bias on roles and responsibilities and organisational DEI;
- Provide you with tools to reduce unconscious bias or mitigate the impact thereof; and
- Provide additional resources to further reduce unconscious bias at the organisational level.

Document user guide (2/2)

Who should use this document?

This document is useful for anyone who wants to design unconscious bias training workshops for organisational DEI purposes, such as:

- **Human Resources managers** who would like to incorporate unconscious bias training into new employees' induction agenda;
- **DEI officers/Transformation managers** who would like to address the issue of unconscious bias within the organisation to promote a sense of belonging;
- **Learning and Development managers** who want to leverage unconscious bias training to mitigate the negative impacts of unconscious bias and to enhance workplace productivity; and
- **Team leaders** who want to address unconscious bias in their teams.

How to use this document?

This document lays out the proposed sequential steps of an unconscious bias training workshop. Each step builds on previous activities and includes recommended exercises designed to help participants deepen their awareness of unconscious biases and reduce the negative impact of these unconscious biases both at an individual and organisational level.

The structure of the document is based on global best practices on unconscious bias training, including academic research and evidence-based studies on unconscious bias training from authoritative sources, such as the [Equality and Human Rights Commission](#) and the [Harvard Law Review](#).

Flexibility is encouraged: you should take this guidance and sample, tweak, or adapt it for your purposes.

1. Step 1: Test for your own unconscious biases



This step will help you better understand your own unconscious biases, which will serve as a baseline insight for the remainder of the training.

Suggested Activities:

Take five minutes to reflect on the following questions:¹

What core beliefs do I hold and how might these beliefs limit or enable me and my colleagues at work?

How do I react to people from different backgrounds and do I hold stereotypes or assumptions about a particular social group?

As a leader/ manager/ team member, do I acknowledge and leverage differences on my team?

Do my words and actions reflect my intentions?

Do I put myself in the shoes of others and empathise with their situation, even if I don't relate to it?



Did you know?

To **measure unconscious bias**, you can use the Implicit Association Test ("IAT"). Created by Professors Mahzarin Banaji and Anthony Greenwald and available to the public for free on [this website](#) maintained by Harvard University, the IAT measures the strength of unconscious associations by calculating the speed of participants' responses to various stimuli.

2. Step 2: Discuss your unconscious bias reflections



This session provides you with an opportunity to debrief on prior reflections and discuss unconscious biases with other people in a safe environment.

Suggested Activities:

Discuss your reflections on questions in the previous step with the person sitting next to you. Use the following guidelines.

IMPORTANT: You do not need to share sensitive information about yourself - no-one should be forced to reveal their unconscious biases if they are not comfortable doing so. If you are uncomfortable with sharing any personal details or responses to any of the questions suggested throughout this guide, feel free to keep the discussion general and non-specific.

Reflect on what your potential unconscious biases are, or what some unconscious biases in your team might be

Discuss how the dynamics of the legal sector in South Africa might play a role in our unconscious biases

Consider how firm structures and culture could help people to identify and acknowledge their own unconscious biases

Reflect on how unconscious biases might negatively influence one's ability to perform one's job effectively



Did you know?

Dedicating time to debrief implicit bias test results leads to increased awareness about one's own unconscious biases and the mitigation of negative implicit biases, according to a study conducted by the Health Sciences Center Office of Diversity and Inclusion in the University of Louisville in 2017.²

3. Step 3: Explain unconscious bias (1/2)



This session showcases a few theories that help explain why people have unconscious biases, laying the foundation for the next step where bias reduction and mitigation strategies are discussed.



Kahneman's "System 1 and System 2"

Introduced by Daniel Kahneman, this model describes two modes of thinking that the human mind employs to process information. **System 1 is fast, automatic, and intuitive**, consisting of innate mental activities that humans engage in effortlessly. In contrast, **System 2 involves deliberate, conscious cognitive processes** for complex tasks. Although people often believe their decisions are driven by the deliberate System 2, System 1 can involuntarily influence judgment and decision-making. This involuntary influence is closely linked to implicit biases, which occur spontaneously and without conscious awareness.



Dual Attitudes Model

Widely used in social psychology, the Dual Attitudes model explains that individuals can **hold two different attitudes toward the same object**. One is the **implicit attitude**, which is unconscious and automatic, while the other is the **explicit attitude**, which is conscious and controlled. These attitudes coexist within an individual's mind, often without their awareness. Implicit attitudes, influenced by **early cultural and social exposure**, can lead to unconscious biases, such as stereotypes about social groups. Meanwhile, explicit attitudes are shaped by education and experience, often designed to avoid societal disapproval.



Social Identity Theory

Developed by Henri Tajfel, this theory explores how **in-group** and **out-group** dynamics shape individual biases and prejudices. It was initially created to explain intergroup conflicts and relations on a broad scale. According to the theory, **individuals tend to favor positive characteristics of their in-groups**, which enhances their self-esteem and personal identity. As a result, they may **unconsciously develop biases against out-group members** by focusing on negative traits, fostering prejudices and reinforcing social barriers.

3. Step 3: Explain unconscious bias (2/2)

Suggested Activities:

Discuss your reflections on the questions below with the person sitting next to you



How could you increase the share of system 2 thinking in your interaction with clients, colleagues, and strangers?



How did your cultural and social upbringing affect your perception of those different from you?



How should organisations avoid creating in- and out-groups to reduce intergroup bias (conscious or unconscious)?



What unconscious biases are most likely to show up in the South African legal sector?

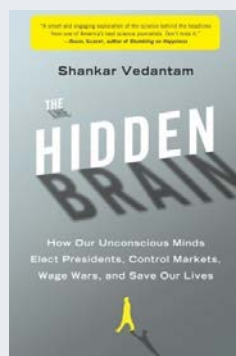


Further reading



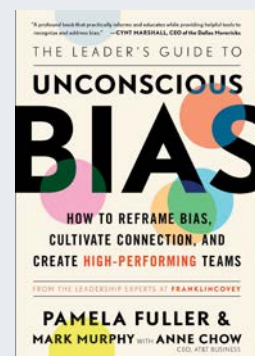
Thinking, Fast and Slow by Daniel Kahneman

dives into the two modes of thought: "System 1" is fast, instinctive and emotional; "System 2" is slower, more deliberative, and more logical.



The Hidden Brain by Shankar Vedantam

explores latest discoveries in neuroscience, psychology, and behavioral science to uncover the darkest corner of our minds and its impact on the choices we make as individuals and as a society.



The Leader's Guide to Unconscious Bias by Pamela Fuller and others

explains reasons for unconscious bias, its effect on our organisation and success, and how to overcome unconscious bias

4. Step 4: Impact of unconscious bias (1/2)



This session is intended to demonstrate the negative impact of unconscious biases on us and our organisation by encouraging storytelling.

Suggested Activities:

Volunteers can share a story where they were the victim of someone else's unconscious biases (or where they unwittingly hurt someone else through their own biases) and tell the group:

1. How it made them feel;

2. How it affected their relationship with the other person; and

3. How it affected their perception of the other person's professionalism and capability.



Did you know?

In 2019, **Deloitte** conducted a survey on 3,000 individuals on their experiences and perceptions of bias at workplaces. It found that:¹

68% said that witnessing or experiencing bias had a negative impact on their **productivity**.

84% said that bias has a negative impact on their happiness, confidence, and **well-being**.

70% believed that the bias they have felt, experienced, or witnessed has negatively impacted on their **level of engagement** at work.

Step 4: Impact of unconscious bias (2/2)

Here are some examples of how unconscious biases might show up in the legal sector of South Africa, according to personal stories shared by GC for D&I “unconscious bias” working group participants:

“The way we phrase our job descriptions can unintentionally favor certain groups, limiting the diversity of applicants we attract”.

“Hiring managers might prefer candidates with similar educational backgrounds, such as those from the same law school, which might inadvertently narrow our talent pool.”

“During interviews, women often receive questions about their marital status or family plans, which aren’t typically directed at male candidates, raising concerns about fairness.”

“Certain individuals are consistently overlooked for specific work assignments due to unconscious biases affecting these decisions.”

“Employees considered part of the ‘in-group’ often have better promotion prospects, suggesting underlying biases we need to address.”

“Candidates are sometimes asked about the scholarships they received, implying an assumption about their financial background that may not be appropriate.”

“In meetings, certain team members are expected to handle tasks like pouring coffee, possibly due to assumptions related to gender, race, or rank, which we should be cautious about.”

“English proficiency is sometimes incorrectly used as a proxy for competence, disadvantaging non-native English speakers, especially in a diverse context like South Africa.”

“When black women demonstrate competence, it can sometimes be met with unwarranted surprise or skepticism.”

“Mentoring opportunities often go to junior lawyers with similar backgrounds to senior staff, which might be an example of affinity bias rather than a merit-based decision.”



Are these examples surprising to you?



Do they resonate with you?



Can you think of other examples?

5. Step 5: Reduce unconscious bias (1/2)



This session is intended to provide you with **strategies for reducing unconscious bias or mitigating the negative impacts thereof.**

Suggested Activities for bias mitigation:

Discuss the following questions within a group

Identify a **key process** in your organisation where unconscious biases are prone to occur (e.g., promotion, recruitment, marketing, work allocation, business development)



For this key process, describe **what the potential negative impacts** of unconscious bias are



Work in a team to design organisational guidelines/ strategies to **mitigate** these negative impacts



Bias mitigation vs reduction¹

Bias mitigation limits the negative impact(s) of unconscious biases without necessarily changing the underlying biases. This is most relevant in an organisational setting, where it is difficult to collectively reduce everyone's unconscious biases.

Bias reduction strategies aim to decrease levels of implicit biases. This is most useful in personal development, where one has control over one's own biases.

5. Step 5: Reduce unconscious bias (2/2)

As a final step, we suggest coming back to ourselves and our own biases, and using what we have learnt so far to help reduce our unconscious biases.

Suggested Activities for bias reduction¹



Empathy Exercise

Activity: Pair with someone and take turns to share personal stories related to your background and identity. After this is completed, recount the story from the teller's perspective. Emphasise any unique challenges with unconscious biases that might be relevant.

Why is this activity effective: Putting oneself in another's shoes enhances empathy, reduces prejudice, and provides a deeper understanding of others' experiences.

Additional guidance: Engage deeply with experiences that differ from your own, approach the conversations with curiosity, and practice empathy.



Counter-Stereotype Storytime

Activity: Use your own stories, or stories from people you know, to share a counter-stereotypical narrative or image (ones that defy stereotypical descriptions).

Why is this activity effective: Actively countering stereotypes with positive images or stories can replace entrenched biases with more balanced perceptions.

Additional guidance: The counter-stereotype stories you share need not be about yourself and can be about people you know (e.g., someone you know who has defied your previously held stereotypes about a particular group of people). If you are stuck for examples, fictional characters or even famous individuals might be useful examples to consider.



Diversity Curiosity Circle

Activity: Create a "radically safe" space where you are encouraged to ask stereotype-related questions that you were too afraid to ask in the past.

Why is this activity effective: Encouraging open dialogue about unconscious stereotypes will allow targets of these stereotypes to address commonly held misconceptions.

Additional guidance: Ensure that you ask the question politely and you are motivated by curiosity to learn more about other people rather than prejudice. This exercise must be handled sensitively and must be well facilitated. If you feel that there is a significant risk of conflict and negative experiences for whatever reason, we suggest prioritising the other activities.

Sources: 1. Based on Hoffman and Winter (2022), ["Follow the Science: Proven Strategies for Reducing Unconscious Bias"](#)

A woman in a green blazer is standing in front of a whiteboard, smiling and gesturing with her hands. She appears to be presenting or leading a workshop. The whiteboard has various diagrams and notes on it. Other people are partially visible in the background, suggesting a group setting.

Additional resources

- Equality and Human Rights Commission (2018), [“How effective is unconscious bias training? An assessment of the evidence”](#)
- Suveren (2022), [“Unconscious Bias: Definition and Significance”](#)
- Hoffman and Winter (2022), [“Follow the Science: Proven Strategies for Reducing Unconscious Bias”](#)
- Acton (2022), [“Are you aware of your biases?”](#)
- Unconscious bias awareness raising workshop service providers in South Africa: [Unconscious Bias Awareness Raising Workshop](#)
- [Why identify your bias? - Unconscious Bias \(with Audio Descriptions\) Video Tutorial | LinkedIn Learning, formerly Lynda.com](#)

We would like to hear your feedback!

Get in touch with us at
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