

Unconscious Bias

By: Peggy S. Bud, Education and Communication Consultant

Whenever two or more people interact, they are communicating. They are forming relationships; connections, associations or involvements. If the communication is **effective**, it will lead to building and sustaining positive relationships. If it is ineffective, it may cause the downfall of the relationship or organization.

Communication, which is a two-way process, is a learned skill and takes practice. Warren Buffet said if you hone your personal communication skills, you can boost your lifetime earning potential by 50%. Sharpening those skills and strategies means understanding the different components of communication: verbal, vocal, non-verbal, written, and active and reflective listening. It also means understanding that people communicate differently; those differences directly impact relationships and decision making.

Whenever we are communicating, whether with family, friends, co-workers, customers or clients, our first thought is 'what we are going to say.' Our words are only 7% of any message. It's the other 93% that impacts how our message is understood and interpreted. We all have different communication styles, affected by culture, region, nationality, age, education and gender. Our communication mannerisms may create barriers; those barriers impact how others interpret what we're saying.

We are born with the physical and cognitive ability to send messages; initially they are not gender specific. All babies produce the same newborn-sounding cry that says "I'm here. I'm alive." Babies continue to communicate without showing any gender specific differences until around the age of 2. It is at that point gender differences begin to emerge. Girls tend to develop language at an earlier age than boys. Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) has documented that boys and girls actually use different parts of their brain when performing language tasks. The fMRIs provide concrete evidence that communication skills are hard-wired and gender specific.

Nurturing also plays a part in developing communication skills; boys and girls are taught to communicate differently. Parents and educators TV, the movies, and literature all document that girls and boys communicate differently and for different reasons. Girls talk to develop relationships; to make and keep friendships. They learn that talking is the glue that binds those relationships. On the other hand, boys learn the development and maintenance of friendships doesn't require talking; it requires doing. Through activities, boys develop relationships.

Bias allows gender to impact how others interpret and understand what is being said. Those differences can be either conscious or unconscious. Here's a riddle that highlights unconscious bias. *A surgeon enters the emergency room and says "I can't operate on this person; he's my son." The surgeon is not the patient's father. So, why can't the surgeon operate? The surgeon is the patient's mother.* Our unconscious bias was triggered by the word 'surgeon.' We immediately heard the word and envisioned a man standing in the operating room.

Many times we are unaware of this bias or how it impacts our lives, our relationships, and our careers. It has only been within the last 20 years that research has focused on the concept of unconscious bias. As people become more aware of it, they are trying to make changes. Here's an example of how a change has affected unconscious bias. *At one time there were very few women in major orchestras around the*

world? Why? Unconscious bias! Then auditions were made gender free by having the performers play behind a screen. Musicians' skills could now be rated without any gender bias. This change in audition procedures meant the number of females in orchestras world-wide increased from 5% in 1970 to 40% today.

A Harvard Business study looked at the leadership traits of men and women and found that in 12 out of 16 instances women scored higher than men. Yet, women continue to struggle to break the glass ceiling. Why? It isn't because they aren't trying. It's more likely due to unconscious bias. This bias is exacerbated by a female's communication style, which is different from a male's style.

Women tend to have to work harder to prove themselves. In some organizations, they are held to a higher standard or at least a different standard. Unconscious bias says if a man is aggressive, he's a take charge individual; he has strong leadership characteristics. His communication style is what gets him the promotion. When a woman acts in a similar aggressive manner, unconscious bias labels her communication style as domineering and over bearing. It's what prevents her from getting the promotion. Unconscious bias at work!

Men dominate top leadership and decision making positions. Too often their decisions and recommendations are based on unconscious bias rather than on the skills and qualifications of the applicants. Men tend to recommend other men for top positions, likely using unconscious bias as the basis for their decision. It may surprise you to know that women sometimes display unconscious bias toward other women. They too may recommend a man versus a woman for a job or promotion solely based on gender as the criteria.

The goal is to reduce the amount of unconscious bias found in the office. How? Find ways to heighten everyone's awareness of the role bias plays in decision making. Develop innovative ways to remove gender bias from the hiring, promoting, evaluating, and firing process. Help men and women be self-reflective regarding why they are making a decision or recommendation. Change in this area may be slow but hopefully it's coming. It should lead to more diversity, which will build stronger teams and more successful businesses.

About Peggy

*Peggy Bud is an Education and Communication Consultant and a certified speech-language pathologist. She teaches her clients how to effectively communicate when interacting with customers, clients and colleagues. Communication is a company's most powerful tool and will directly impact the company's bottom line. **It's more than what you say; it's how you say it.** Peggy can be reached at Peggy@PeggyBud.com or via telephone 203.952.8534. Learn more at her web site: www.PeggyBud.com*

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