



# Sarah Cornally

*Evolving Leaders • Transforming Organisations*

## From inappropriate remarks to respectful awareness; dealing with unconscious bias in the workplace

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Inappropriate remarks happen often in the workplace. Politically incorrect comments can be especially volatile – there is often an instant social backlash if inappropriate remarks are made about race, gender, homophobia, or other crucial topics. In this article, Sarah Cornally shows how to address the unconscious bias that often lies behind such unwanted remarks. She shares how she has assisted organisations to respond effectively to these challenges, working carefully with all people involved to create deeper understanding and respect.



### **What is going on when someone makes a particularly inappropriate or socially unacceptable remark?**

Often, people are unaware that they hold an offending opinion or judgement – it lies in their sub-conscious. If something triggers a person's sub-conscious, they can find themselves with an inappropriate remark coming straight out of their own mouth. This can be quite startling, because often they have been socialised not to hold such judgements.

### **When inappropriate remarks are made, how can we respond appropriately?**

Rather than judging, condemning and excluding the person who has said something inappropriate, I

suggest examining these incidents through the lens of unconscious bias. Because prejudice (a pre-judgement of somebody or something) often originates from the sub-conscious, the person is probably unaware of having the judgement in the first place, unless we encourage them to explore the incident further.

### **What is an example of unconscious bias playing out in the workplace?**

Quite often, unconscious bias shows in situations of tension or stress. For example, a male client of mine once made an inappropriate sexist remark when there were only one or two females in the room. Everyone could feel instantly that this was the wrong thing to have said. As he worked through this issue with me later, he shared that he had struggled to find words to explain his thoughts. At the time, he was speaking about a complex issue in a public and sensitive situation. Out popped this primitive comment, which clearly came from something deep in his sub-conscious. The minute the words came out of his mouth, he knew it was the wrong thing to say. He even commented that it was the wrong thing to say, but he was caught up in the subject of the meeting. So instead of stopping and attending to it immediately, he kept on going, as is common behaviour when dealing with something awkward and uncomfortable. This brought up cultural tension from moving on too quickly.

### **Is unconscious bias prevalent in everyday life?**

Yes. It is normal human behaviour to have unconscious bias, although it is not something for anyone to be proud of or to explain away. Because it is so common, however, it does become problematic to judge or criticise people when they accidentally expose their unconscious bias.

If we come down really heavily on people for these kinds of accidental slips, it becomes unsafe for other people to acknowledge the possibility that they might be holding unconscious bias of their own. This inadvertently reinforces the bias as something that needs to stay in the sub-conscious, by not allowing a legitimate way to bring it out in the open for discussion. To address this kind of unconscious bias helpfully, we need to discuss issues safely while supporting people to change.

### **Is it true that these slips are 'out of character'?**

It may be true and it may not be true. It is unhelpful to assume one way or the other; it needs to be examined. If people claim their statement was out of character, they are often accused of not facing up to what they said – so they can be damned if they admit their bias or damned if they do not. We need to be prepared to examine bias, recognising that it could be beneath the person's awareness.

### **What happens when we do not provide a place to allow the unconscious bias to surface?**

If the unconscious bias is never acknowledged, it becomes like Pandora's Box – the more you push unwanted bias deep into the box, the more pent-up energy it collects. Eventually, it will come out of the box when you are not expecting it. Bias needs to be brought into the open and carefully re-framed. If this has not happened, the bias remains under the surface, still influencing your thinking.

### **What would be a healthy way to address unconscious bias?**

The only way that you can change unconscious bias is to bring it into your awareness, examine it and understand what it actually is. A lot of these biases are embedded when you are a child. They can stick in the sub-conscious, continuing to affect your thoughts. You can decide to deliberately bring any bias into your awareness, really seeking to change your inner relationship with it. This will bring growth.

### **What are some workplace examples of how unconscious bias plays out?**

#### ***Unconscious bias – early career experience undermining future work relationships***

I worked with a successful female executive, who would do well in new roles for an initial time period, and then consistently find that issues would crop up at the twelve-month mark with her manager, usually a man. She was unaware of the pattern until we examined her work history. From there I asked about her relationship with her first boss. She told the story of a boss who she had looked up to and regarded with a lot of respect, but he ended up betraying her and making her the scapegoat for a poor business decision. She was forced to leave and felt a great deal of shame.

Unfortunately this incident was playing out from her sub-conscious, being triggered every time she had a male manager. Her behaviour inadvertently led to a breakdown in relationship with each new manager, because she was unconsciously expecting that sometime soon he would betray her. When this came out, she was surprised and relieved to see how she, through her unconscious bias, was contributing to the situation. With reframing, she was able to extinguish the pattern.

#### ***Unconscious bias – gendered environments***

I meet many men who want to support women and who agree with the value of women's contributions. In their conscious thinking, they are very supportive of women and will do anything to support them if asked. But, when they get into a room where all the men are being a bit 'blokey', they feel drawn to join that male group, even when they know that the women who are also present feel uncomfortable. It is possible that they have had experiences as a young boy where they were excluded for not participating in group behaviour. Consider how important it is to all of us to belong. It is common for men to go along with blokey behaviour because of unconscious influences.

There is another unconscious bias men can have. Sometimes despite truly appreciating and actively supporting women, they might have an underlying belief that women "need" their help. This implies that women are lacking something or are lesser than men or inferior. Its effect is patronising, and the attitude can come across subtly in social interactions. But the men may not realise that they hold this perception.

## Unconscious bias – presenting like bullying or harassment

I was called into a case where a female executive accused the male CEO of bullying and harassment. After my analysis, we actually found (and they both eventually admitted) a mutual responsibility for it all. She was inviting him coquettishly to take care of her, acting out her unconscious bias – that she felt she needed to woo the male to get what she wanted. And he fell for it, enjoying the feeling of taking care of her, up until she disagreed with him. Both of them had fallen into a trap originating from their unconscious biases. She had invited her boss too closely into her personal life. He had confused their roles by being too supportive. Problems showed when they got into disagreements and he had to exercise his authority as the CEO, but she reacted as the rejected lover. It was worthwhile spending time with both of them, and seeing what understanding came to light as their unconscious biases were brought to the surface.

## Do you see instances of unconscious gender bias from women towards men?

Sometimes. This sort of bias can show up if a woman often defers to men without realising that this behaviour is habitual for her. Bias can also show up if a woman assumes (sub-consciously) that men are going to take everything away from her, so she acts in an overly aggressive manner to protect herself from the perceived threat.

## How do you shift unconscious bias?

It is difficult to shift unconscious bias, because you have to be able to talk about it in an openhearted skilful way so that people do not feel judged. The first step is often to help the person realise that there is a problem to be dealt with at all. Then they will need to ask themselves, “To what extent am I contributing to the situation?”

It is good to be mindful of political correctness in our language – it is a way of being conscious not to judge others unfairly. The more aware we can all become of how we might disrespect another person based on unfounded judgements, the better. But we have to be careful not to be militant about politically correct language to an extent where it becomes unsafe to discuss any bias at all. There needs to be a conversational space where it is safe to explore possible underlying biases. Then we will be able to discover new, more enlightened perspectives.

## Is saying sorry enough to repair the damage?

Saying sorry is not enough – a person’s actions need to show that they have changed. They need to show awareness of the impact on other people when something inappropriate was said. They need to demonstrate that they know exactly what was said and how it was harmful and incorrect. They need to have sought to deal with the cause of the remark. They need to have taken steps to shift their unconscious bias so that the issue will not be repeated. This takes humility.

Unconscious bias is understandable and very human; that is what happens, that is what human beings do. But if want it to change we have to look at it differently; we have to shift to a higher order relationship with it.

## Why is the punishment approach not useful when dealing with unconscious bias?

Condemnation, judging, and sometimes even persecution or a legalistic approach all attempt to punish the person for behaving badly. But these approaches do not bring change. If an executive is found bullying and we just punish them, perhaps firing them from their job, how will they learn? How will they change? They could potentially feel victimised by the punishment and then put all their energy into the victimisation, rather than putting energy into inner awareness and change.

*My perspective is that when we punish or seek to condemn we actually become like the behaviour we thought was so abhorrent. We start excluding, distancing and disassociating, which is interesting, as that is what we say the other person has done with their prejudice or inappropriate remark. It is good to have boundaries regarding what is acceptable and what is not. It is how we manage those boundaries that determines whether learning is made possible.*

Exclusion sometimes becomes appropriate later, if no learning or development has taken place. An example of this is a CEO who ended up losing her job because of adversarial behaviour. She could not see that she had an unconscious bias that was causing her to fight complaints made against her, rather than being open to what she could learn from those complaints. Attempts were made by the board to offer the opportunity of going down a developmental path. They wanted this CEO to learn from this experience. Yet, the CEO and her advisor were determined to pursue an adversarial approach. She demonstrated this problematic behaviour directly against the board and indicated her refusal to go into a developmental mindset. Despite the successes achieved by this CEO, the board made the call that her blind spot would create unacceptable issues for the organisation. She had to go.

### **What approach do you recommend when dealing with unconscious bias?**

My preferred approach requires a willingness and a really strong sense of self. It is important to be able to say, “I know who I am. Knowing who I am gives me the strength to look at parts of me that it is difficult to look at; the parts of me that, certainly when I was younger, I was taught to be ashamed of and hide.”

I ask people I am working with to ask themselves, “Have I conducted myself in a way that would lead to a really good outcome? Or have I, in some small way, conducted myself in a way that has contributed to this situation?” So, if, for instance, as a woman, I go into a meeting and I have some doubts about my voice being heard, does that lead to my becoming too forceful in trying to get my voice heard? Or does it lead to my being quiet for so long that people have forgotten that I am there? Either way, have I increased the hurdle for me to overcome? To what extent am I contributing to this? Now, that is not to let men off the hook, either, because we also ask to what extent the other party is contributing to the situation. However, the reality remains: I cannot change another person, I can only change myself.

### **What should an organisation do if someone makes an unacceptable or inappropriate remark?**

The most effective responses come from a desire for growth and accountability. Although it is tempting to want to distance the organisation from every awkward incident, this misses the learning opportunity for the whole system. Rather than spitting people out of the system, punishing them or exiling them where they will feel wounded, the incident can be used as a catalyst for growth and development. This helps to send productive messages to others in the organisation, encouraging them to also seek their best.

The organisation needs to look at the whole person and acknowledge that this slip may not be something they do regularly, and that perhaps there is an unseen factor at play such as unconscious bias. In essence, it needs to be safe to bring these things into the open; to face them honestly and then to explore them with the view to create new awareness and reframing. The key to new awareness is to connect to your own experience of the same thing, perhaps in a different context, and begin to have a personal connection with how this impacts the other person. This may be done in a one-to-one conversation, or you may need the assistance from someone like a coach to learn how to do this well. Other situations can be attended to with a group or a team, which can be very potent. The intent is always to surface the issue, recognising the unconscious bias that led to the situation and agreeing to learn from the experience.

What can senior executives, HR professionals and boards do to better understand and deal with unconscious bias? The best advice is to notice your own unconscious bias as it appears; question your reactions that seem ‘out of character’ to you. You have to be able to understand unconscious bias in yourself first, because you cannot help others with their bias until you know of your own. By being aware of your own bias, you realise, “Oh, that is what I am doing. Hmmm, I do not want to do that.” It is good practice to bring a little distance between your emotional response and how you choose to act next.

From an organisational perspective, you have the opportunity to treat the incident as a learning and development opportunity. If you do not have the in-house capability, you can bring in a skilled facilitator who can work alongside the organisation to enable the unconscious bias to surface. Working relationships can be recovered, often resulting in a grateful employee with enhanced self-awareness, able to continue to contribute to the organisation. You also get the benefit of others in the organisation seeing that support and development was provided for the employee, even after a mistake was made. They learn that it is okay to be human in this workplace, and that respectful awareness can be achieved.

To learn more about raising awareness of your own and your team’s unconscious bias, please [email](#) or ring my EA, Leanne Imbro, to book time for a discussion.

**Written by Sarah Cornally**

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