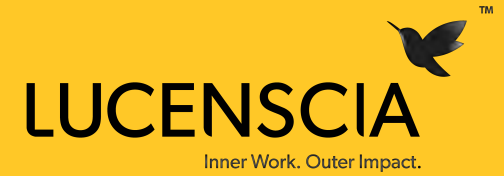


# Unconscious Bias: Turning Discovery & Awareness Into Action & Impact



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Unconscious Bias

# Perception is Truth . . . Sort of

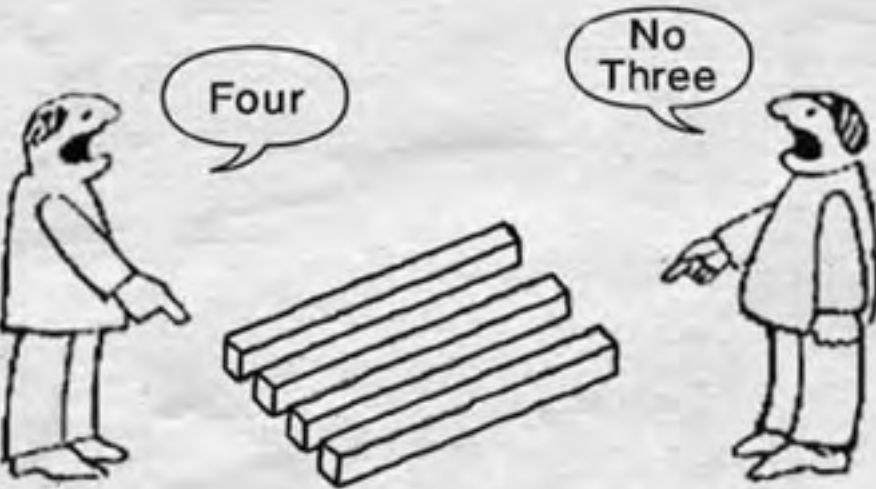
Exploring the Unconscious  
Bias-Compassion Connection

Over the last few years, you may have noticed an increase in the number of articles about unconscious bias and how it impacts the behaviors of leaders and their teams as well as the cultural fabric of an organization. It is also very likely that you've even engaged in multiple conversations (both public and private) about the urgency of creating a "more human" workplace. Despite pervasive talk about our differences (and efforts at corresponding celebrations of those differences), what we have in common is much more pertinent to this conversation.



## Unconscious Bias

**"Everything we hear  
is an opinion, not a fact.  
Everything we see  
is a perspective, not the truth."**



*Illustration courtesy of: The Furturist*

Our desire to feel valued, contribute value and live a meaningful life is held by each of us as part of a shared and common humanity. Sometimes, it is hard to remember that we are all someone's precious child. We all want to be happy, successful, connected, supported, engaged and more. And yet, we frequently experience fear, insecurity and moments of vulnerability. We also bring our perceptions – the lens through which we view life – to interactions holding firmly to the belief that what we see is THE truth. If you don't believe me, consider this parable one of my mentors shared: If you ask a bird and a fish what a boat looks like, they will each give you a different description – and both will be correct based on what they see.

With this contextual backdrop, it is easy to see how we've contributed to existing dynamics and human interactions at work. Good, bad or otherwise, we are each simultaneously part of the workplace and co-creators of its conditions.

# Discovery & Awareness

[S]ocial stereotypes about certain groups of people that individuals form outside their own conscious awareness. Everyone holds unconscious beliefs about various social and identity groups, and these biases stem from one's tendency to organize social worlds by categorizing.

— University of California San Francisco

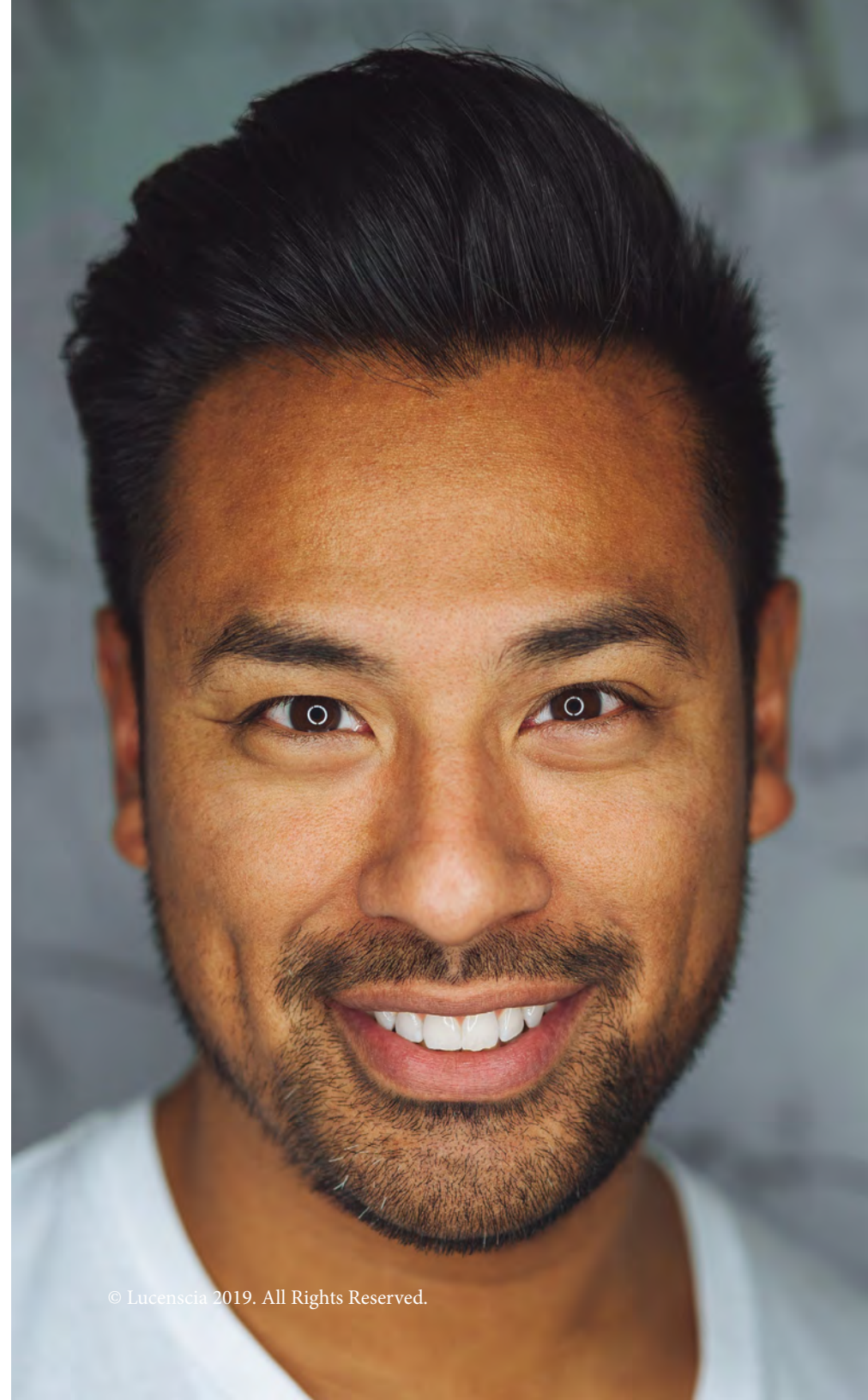


# Discovery & Awareness

If we agree that perception is truth and that our perceptions are formed by our life experiences, feelings, and interactions, we then can begin to see the fertile ground that exists for the cultivation of unconscious bias to flourish. While there exists several definitions for this term (and several types of biases), the [University of California San Francisco](#) describes unconscious bias as the: [S]ocial stereotypes about certain groups of people that individuals form outside their own conscious awareness. Everyone holds unconscious beliefs about various social and identity groups, and these biases stem from one's tendency to organize social worlds by categorizing.

As you can see, unconscious bias is actually an intangible state of mind. [Insight Education Systems](#) eloquently explains the nature of unconscious bias in this way - one cannot do an unconscious bias, just as:

- One cannot "DO" a position – We hold a position.
- One cannot "DO" a filter – We form filters.
- One cannot "DO" a conclusion – We reach a conclusion.



## Action & Impact

If unconscious bias is an intangible state of mind, how do we begin to change our minds and corresponding mindsets and behaviors? As a species, our brain is hardwired to scan for threats. One of the ways we interpret threat — and a primary way unconscious bias shows up — is through our association with people. More specifically, with people we consider to be part of our “in group” (people like us) or part of our “out group” (people not like us). Dr. David Eagleman, a neuroscientist at Stanford University, has done some interesting work in this area revealing that a single word label can change our brain’s pre-conscious response to another person. Even more notably, in one [experiment](#), the research suggests that our empathetic responses to those we consider part of an out group were significantly lower than that expressed for those in our in group. Conclusion: Whether based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, sports team or political affiliation, or other factors, our brain activity reveals that we tend to be less empathetic to people we see as dissimilar to ourselves.

### Shifting from “Diversity & Inclusion” to “Belonging & Unity”

So, the \$64,000 question is: Where does that leave us with unconscious bias and how do we identify, reconcile and manage it within ourselves? First, it is important to note that we all have biases – conscious and unconscious. These do not make us bad people. They are simply part of the human condition. However, it is not enough to simply be aware of our biases. It is also critically important for us to understand, acknowledge and manage their impact on our thoughts, feelings, decisions and behaviors so that we do not create ripples of disparate impact or micro-inequalities (evolving into overarching problems of equity) in the workplace. (For a closer look, consider these three examples illustrating the importance and impact of this work across roles and industries: [orchestras and musicians](#), [educators](#), and [leadership decision-making](#).)



## Unconscious Bias

To bridge the gap between awareness and impact, I am suggesting that we look at two key approaches that would be necessary complements to other implementations in this space. To be clear, these are not stand alone strategies or solutions, but they can serve as helpful foundational support that enable us to shift from surviving to thriving in the workplace.

The first approach is to change the historical terminology of “Diversity and Inclusion” to a new and more expansive, “Belonging and Unity.” Although not a solution in and of itself, words matter. Given our shifting demographics and generational differences (e.g., for the first time in U.S. history, we have up to five generations in the workplace), the D&I label may not adequately invite or ignite the next level of a more human workplace that focuses on the full stakeholder diaspora. Instead, “Belonging and Unity” terminology may better inspire feelings and visions of a table to which everyone has a seat and a voice, thereby enabling over time the difficult and healing conversations we need to have in our homes, communities, and places of work.

### Seeing Similarities & Offering Kindness

No organization, whether government, “big business,” or non-profit, is an inanimate object or machine. They are each made up of people. If an organization is behaving poorly in the world, it is symptomatic of an issue at the human level in need of healing. This is certainly the case when we consider the matter of unconscious bias. The good news is that [research](#) shows that, “the brain is well-equipped for controlling unwanted biases – if the person detects their presence.” With this scientific understanding, I propose that the second complementary approach is to engage in practices that help us broaden our definition of “in group.”

How do we do that? One way is to incorporate two practices borrowed from contemplative traditions that help bridge the gap between awareness and our capacity for connection and reduced bias. These are (i) seeing similarities between ourselves and others (i.e. expanding our in group), and (ii) offering kindness (i.e. extending more empathy and compassion to others). To be effective, these must be honed with regular and consistent practice and application over time in order to create sustainable shifts in mindsets and behavior that mitigates the adverse impact of unconscious bias. (See 2014 [study](#) published in the NeuroLeadership Journal where researchers Lieberman, Rock and Cox, noted a meaningful correlation between the contemplative practice of meditation and a resulting reduction in unconscious bias specifically related to age and race.)



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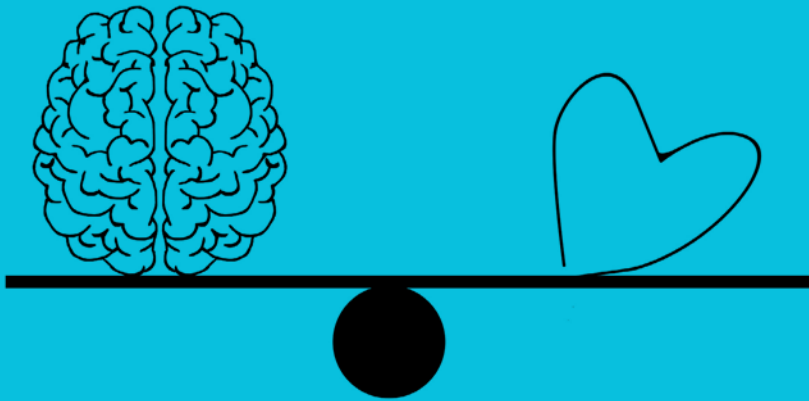


Illustration courtesy of: Pixabay

## Unconscious Bias

The practice of seeing similarities is just what it sounds like – finding commonalities and points of connection between yourself and those you perceive as different from you. This practice can be done in a *dedicated practice* where you set aside time each day to meditate, for example, with the intention of calling to mind others you perceive are different from you, with whom you find it difficult to engage or who are otherwise disconnected from you. This practice also can be done as an *integrated practice* that you weave throughout your day as you engage in meetings, telephone calls, emails, etc. with others. Whether done as a dedicated or an integrated practice, you may begin by bringing gentle awareness to your breath and calling to mind similarities you have with the person or persons noted above. Once called to mind, you may simply and kindly repeat phrases such as, “*Miguel wishes to be successful, just like me ... Miguel has hopes and dreams, just like me ... Miguel has experienced fear and disappointment, just like me ... Miguel is a human being, just like me,*” or any other phrases that help you create meaningful understanding and connection to what is our common humanity.

The companion to this practice, which also can be done in dedicated or integrated fashion, is offering kindness through the extension of intentional wishes. In this instance, we also begin with a focus on our breath. Once we are settled, we then begin by bringing the person or group of people to mind and extending wishes of well-being. Offering wishes may look something like this: “*May Samantha be happy, healthy and successful ... May Samantha be free of pain and suffering ... May Samantha feel loved, connected and valued,*” or may include any other wishes that feel right to you in the moment, again to create a shift to connection.



## Unconscious Bias

Admittedly, for many of us, these practices may seem a little strange and feel awkward at first. However, with repeated and sustained practice, you will begin to notice a shift in your awareness and ability to see how you are perceiving others and, most importantly, how you are interacting with and treating them. With this new awareness and intention to manage your unconscious bias, it can lead to an enhanced capacity to take more choiceful and compassionate action. In fact, over time, you may discover that you begin to create ripples of positive impact and change across your spheres of influence as you naturally shift how you are showing up in the present moment.

While there are many ways to address unconscious bias, the above contemplative practices may be effective tools to mitigate its impact because they also activate areas of the brain associated with empathy, compassion and executive reasoning (e.g., [the anterior cingulate cortex](#), insula and pre-frontal cortex), while simultaneously helping to down regulate signals from the part of our brain that is responsible for emotions and threat detection.

As we strive to make the workplace and our communities more human, it will take many integrated approaches that may enhance or even replace historical strategies. We are changing. The workplace is changing. It will take all of us to move into an emerging, new normal. Are you ready?



### About Michelle

Michelle Maldonado is CEO of Lucenscia, a human capital development and business strategy firm dedicated to developing leaders and organizations with positive impact in the world. She is a Certified Genos International Emotional Intelligence Practitioner® and one of a handful of the Google-inspired Search Inside Yourself (SIY) Certified Teachers.® Michelle was named “Top Corporate Leader” by HR.com’s Leadership Essentials and “Woman of The Year” by the National Association of Professional Women. As a recommended speaker in SHRM’s Speaker’s Bureau, her work has been featured across industry publications and venues including The Mindful Leadership Summit, Training, Leadership Excellence, and Chief Learning Officer. [Michelle@Lucenscia.com](mailto:Michelle@Lucenscia.com) | [www.lucenscia.com](http://www.lucenscia.com)



