



SUBCONSCIOUS THOUGHTS

AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE WORKPLACE

BY PATICE L. HOLLAND AND LEAH M. STIEGLER

The CEO walked into the packed conference room, pivoted to face 12 nervous department directors. Twenty-four eyes were glued to the pristine, tailored-fit suit in front of them. Putting a coffee mug on the table, “Good morning. Let’s begin,” she said.

Okay, be honest—were you taken a bit off guard when you found out the CEO was a woman? Don’t feel bad. If you are like most American workers, you were picturing the CEO as a man. It was not intentional, and, in fact, it was not a conscious thought. Instead, it is what we refer to as an “implicit bias” (also known as an “unconscious bias”). An implicit bias is something that everybody has. It is an unconscious and unintentional thought that underlies much of our decision-making. It applies generally to how we perceive other people and things based on physical appearances. And, because it affects our perceptions, it consequently affects our conduct. Take a simple example: You are walking down the sidewalk and you see someone walking toward you with a large pit bull. What is your immediate thought? It likely isn’t, “Oh look, a cute puppy!” In reality, you are probably thinking you should cross to the opposite side of the street because that dog looks dangerous. In this situation, you perceived the dog’s physical appearance, associated it with danger—perhaps from some societal stereotype or childhood experience—and chose to cross the street.

So, what is the big problem? Sounds like this whole implicit bias thing helps us make safer choices!

Unfortunately, implicit biases don’t always help us make safer or positive choices. In fact, many implicit biases are disparate impacts that negatively affect or treat certain persons differently based on physical characteristics.

Replace the pit bull with a dark-skinned person. If you still cross the street, you may have an implicit bias in that you are associating dark-skinned people with danger. While your conduct in crossing the street may not have lifelong impacts on the dark-skinned sidewalk pedestrian, it certainly may in the business world. These biases become quite harmful when they creep up on us in employment contexts. Consider these occurrences:

- Let’s say you are a white HR director interviewing applicants for an opening in your company: If you decide to hire a light-skinned applicant over an equally qualified dark-skinned applicant, your creeping bias may have just led you to discriminate.
- Let’s go back to the CEO example: People commonly associate CEOs with descriptors such as “leader, strong, in charge, and powerful.” If people also unconsciously perceive CEOs as men, they are automatically associating those descriptors with men. If these people are hiring a CEO or simply choosing a department director to serve as a project manager, they may be giving the male applicants/employees an unconscious “leg up” against the females.
- Let’s also note this thought pattern goes beyond hiring and promotions and affects everyday interactions between employees: Consider an employee who has an implicit bias where he associates Muslims with terrorism. Should this employee act on his bias, the company now may have a harassment case on its hands.

The unintended consequence is that implicit biases may cause us to discriminate, even unintentionally, which ultimately hinders the diversity and civility of our workforce.

So, what can we do about it?

First, recognize it. Nothing is truly unconscious if you can think about it. Take time to think about the reasons you engage in certain conduct. Ask yourself, “Did I act by gut-reaction? And, if yes, why did I do that?” The more you think about harmful perceptions and associations (even after the fact), the better you can fight them. And, we must fight them because every time we ignore a biased thought, the bias becomes more ingrained in our conscience and continues to exist and persist in our daily conduct.

Second, employers should start to add implicit bias and civility segments to their annual harassment trainings. It is not only essential for human resources professionals and hiring managers, but for all employees. Training on recognizing these biases is the first step to improve civility amongst employees and create a comfortable working environment. If harmful perceptions, barriers, and associations in your business are eliminated, you most certainly will see increased productivity from your employees and an overall happier workplace. **LB**



Patice L. Holland, Principal, Woods Rogers PLC, Labor & Employment Practice. Patice L. Holland, a principal in Woods Rogers’ Roanoke office, is an attorney who focuses primarily on employment litigation defense, intellectual property, transportation law (FELA, SAA, LIA), general civil and commercial litigation, real estate and commercial and residential landlord-tenant litigation, and insurance defense

Leah M. Stiegler, Associate, Woods Rogers PLC, Labor & Employment Practice. Leah Stiegler focuses on helping employers comply with various employment laws, defending related employment actions with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and in state or federal court, conducting workplace and board training, guiding employers through workplace investigations, and working with employers regarding collective bargaining and grievances/arbitrations.

