



## Neutralizing Implicit Biases

by Dr. Arin N. Reeves

Implicit biases are cognitive shortcuts we have formed over the course of our lifetimes that impact the decisions we make. Also known as implicit associations, these shortcuts create links between two things (such as certain groups and work ethic, certain physical characteristics and leadership capabilities, certain generations and life values, etc.) and cause us to rely on the link - instead of reality - to form opinions and/or conclusions about people. Because we don't know we are relying on these shortcuts, we often believe that we are making conscious reasoned decisions when in fact we used our implicit associations.

Neutralizing implicit biases can take one of two forms:

- Preventing the shortcut from triggering, and
- Interrupting the shortcut to consciously question your thought process.

### Preventing the Shortcut from Triggering

- **Hide the triggers.** We know names and other types of information on resumes trigger our implicit associations, so providing resumes to screeners and interviewers that don't have names, addresses, and other personal information prevents the associations from triggering. When the associations don't trigger, the conscious brain can be the primary evaluator of the relevant information in the resume.
- **Focus on behaviors, not opinions.** When we ask for opinions, we trigger implicit associations. When we ask for assessments of behaviors, we evoke conscious thought. For example, "What do you think about Susan?" triggers implicit bias, "Can you tell me what you've observed of Susan's abilities to negotiate tough situations?" evokes conscious thought rooted in behaviors.
- **Ask people for details.** When you hear people talk about other people, ask for details like "what makes you think that" or "what did you observe that led you to think that." Asking for these details helps you see the data behind a potential bias so that you can reach your own conclusions, and it also helps other people realize what data they were using (or not using!) to reach other conclusions.
- **Increase the diversity in your personal circles.** The more people you know and trust who are different from you, the less likely your biases for that group are to be triggered. It is important to remember that diversifying just your professional circles doesn't do it; you have to diversify your personal circles.



## Interrupting the Shortcut to Consciously Question Your Thought Process

- **Ask why.** Once you reach a conclusion about a person, an idea, or anything, ask yourself why you think what you think. Ask yourself why you relied on the data you relied upon, why you chose one option over another option, why you feel the need to answer this question at all, etc. The more you question your conclusions, the more aware you become of points in the decision-making process when you made a leap without actual information.
- **Be your own Devil's Advocate.** Think of people in your life that you like and dislike and be your own Devil's Advocate. Argue for the opposite of what you think about the person. If you had to convince yourself that you shouldn't like someone you really like, what data would you use? When you do this, you are using your conscious brain to argue with your unconscious brain.
- **Do things differently.** If you make decisions differently, you will make different decisions. Change the processes through which you make decisions. It will allow conscious thought to coexist alongside your implicit associations, so your thought process will be more critical.
- **Do the unexpected.** When you do the expected, your implicit biases flow in to help you rely on established habits. When you do the unexpected, your unconscious brain can't always provide the shortcuts, so you will rely on your conscious thought instead of your unconscious shortcuts.

Implicit biases affect all of our decision-making processes, but all of us also have the ability to neutralize the impact of these biases in our decision-making processes. Biases are implicit, but our decisions to neutralize them can be explicit.

*A leading researcher, author, and advisor in the fields of leadership and inclusion, Arin received her J.D. from University of Southern California and received her Ph.D. in Sociology from Northwestern University. Arin is a best-selling author of two books – The Next IQ and One Size Never Fits All – and she is the President of the research and advisory firm, Nextions, a new way of seeing and doing leadership and inclusion. Arin has designed and led several comprehensive research projects on leadership and inclusion in topics ranging from gender equity, cultural integration and implicit bias.*