



## THE GENDER PRISM: “ALL THE LIGHT WE CANNOT SEE”

### THE HARM OF SECOND-GENERATION GENDER BIAS

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While first-generation gender bias was largely associated with outward discrimination that was once legal, despite the women's movement being in force at the time, we are now faced with [second-generation gender bias](#), which is more invisible but exists in the form of common stereotypes.

First-generation bias is apparent to the naked eye; when it occurs, we can categorize it and ultimately hold people and organizations accountable for it. Yet, if we limit the gender debate to the narrow prism of our vision, we only see a few colors on the discrimination spectrum. The question is: What can't the human eye see? Think of the invisible light – radio, infrared, ultraviolet, X-ray, gamma-rays – that is beyond our perception but is potentially the most harmful. The danger of invisible biases is that we tend to perpetuate negative assumptions and beliefs. It is only by expanding our prism beyond our conscious level that we can seek to challenge and correct these unconscious biases.

To explore this, we investigated gender dynamics in a group coaching situation, through two cases that we wrote that were identical in all but one respect: The key coachee was male in one case and female in the other. The case presented a typical scenario – a group coaching situation with individuals of mixed nationalities, organizational backgrounds, gender and age over one week. The key coachee, after initially being very open, increasingly isolates himself/herself from the group and the coach.

After teaching the case to two groups, we summarized the findings of how each group analyzed the case; the differences were striking. The group that analyzed the behavior of the female coachee used adjectives such as “defensive,” “afraid” and “perfectionist” to characterize the coachee and described her as “losing control.” In contrast, the group that analyzed the male coachee in the same scenario, characterized him as “defensive,” “competitive” (potentially competing with the coach), “aggressive” and “embarrassed” after showing his vulnerability.

Each group interpreted its emotional reactions differently depending on the gender of the coachee. When asked what emotions were elicited in the members of the female group, they described feelings of sadness and compassion. For the group discussing the male coachee, the emotions provoked were fear, challenge, tension, frustration, curiosity and belatedly empathy. The proposed actions on how to handle the situation were equally different. The group discussing the female coachee suggested intervening early, on a one-to-one, basis to acknowledge the coachee's needs. In the group discussing the male coachee, the approach was more solution-focused: challenging, re-contracting and discussing within the entire group the impact of the coachee's behaviors. What differences in outcomes might these different coaching approaches yield? Would they serve to reinforce gender stereotypes? And what are the implications for the broader gender-at-work context?

We all have biases, most of which are below our level of consciousness. In fact, it is estimated that as much as 90% of our brain works at the [unconscious level](#). It is a natural shorthand that allows us to quickly assess other people based on our gender, experiences, background and cultural norms. Interestingly unconscious biases often contradict our stated values and beliefs. When our unconscious biases affect our behaviors, we create a system that reinforces stereotypes. When our own subconscious bias is reinforced by others, a culture is created where the bias becomes a norm. The most powerful implication is that it directly affects what we view as the potential of the other person and, by association, how we work with and around them.

Second-generation bias is arguably much more difficult to address than first-generation bias; the object of what we strive to resist is not clear. Behavior consists of an action performed towards a goal in a specific setting with a specified time or event, and as such, it is influenced by behavioral, normative and control beliefs. These are the focus of a study looking at managers' intentions of hiring and developing women in [science, engineering and technology professions](#). The study's findings are parallel with the findings from our cases. For example, one of the behavioral beliefs identified was a persistent belief that women are more emotional and require more effort from a managerial perspective; thus, “as a manager, you have to be gentler with women.” Another is that women have

more responsibilities in the home, so they are less flexible when it comes to their time commitments for work.

The study identified normative beliefs that supporting women's career advancements is simply a "politically correct" thing to do. Few organizations or managers think this is a problem, so it is not addressed. It is such a normative belief that it reinforces the idea of second-generation bias and a complete lack of awareness that there is even a problem to address. In fact, gender is sometimes described as a made-up issue, and this results in a reluctance to support actions that address bias.

As our cases highlighted, different belief systems result in different outcomes. If we fail to address and challenge what goes unseen, we fail to really challenge the subtle environment that holds women back and by which women hold themselves and others back. It is what we cannot see – the invisible light – that can potentially harm us the most.

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