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Title: Unconscious Bias: A Personal Confession

I'd like to share a personal story with you about unconscious bias. It's a story that may feel familiar to some or most of you. And perhaps it will surprise you when I say that I am not the heroine of the story—well, not quite. You see, I am guilty of unconscious bias. “Guilty” is a pretty strong word. Let me rephrase: I, like all humans, have a brain. And each and every day, in response to the overwhelming amount of information my brain encounters, it uses cognitive shortcuts—what we refer to as unconscious biases—to make decisions. Sometimes those shortcuts are helpful to me, but sometimes they are not.

Let me explain. I am an Asian American woman, a Foreign Service Officer, and, more specifically, a Program Officer. I pride myself on being able to get along with *everybody*—and generally, I think others find it easy to get along with me. This is not easy, you see, because part of my job as a Program Officer is to continually task out work to my technical office colleagues, a trait that does not help win popularity contests! Despite this, I've done well according to 360 feedback.

But that's what people see on the outside. On the inside, I have a secret. Remember those mental shortcuts I mentioned? Well, I've got them. For instance, I often find myself drawn to colleagues who are women or who come from an underrepresented background. I don't consciously do this, but my brain often defaults to the “similarity-attraction bias,” meaning that my brain is naturally drawn to people who look or feel familiar to me, whether on the basis of race, gender, or even social class. It just happens, and perhaps some of you can even relate.

What matters, though, is what I do with this information. I've done enough self-reflection over the years to realize that I have this bias—and I've spent plenty of time wrestling with my internal demons to understand that it takes hard work for me to change. Becoming aware of your biases is just the first step. The next step is moving outside of your comfort zone, questioning the status quo, and proactively taking steps to mitigate and even counter those biases. This is a necessary—and critical step—on the path to becoming inclusive leaders. A [2016 report](#) from Deloitte on inclusive leadership states: “Biases are a leader's Achilles' heel, potentially resulting in decisions that are unfair and irrational... [Inclusive leaders know that in] their natural state, without these interventions, [they] tend to lean toward self-cloning and self-interest, and that success in a diverse world requires a different approach.” The report goes on to detail the “6 Cs” of inclusive leadership, which include: Cognizance of Bias; Curiosity; Cultural Intelligence; Courage; Collaboration; and, Commitment.

So, back to my story: when I first became aware of my biases, I decided to take action using the 6 Cs as a starting point. As a first step, in line with building “Cognizance of Bias,” I spent time building self-awareness and, critically, took the necessary step to admit and accept my bias. After all, I am human. As a second step, building on the theme of “Curiosity,” I created more

opportunities to connect with colleagues different from myself by initiating lunch dates. Full confession: I am a natural introvert, so at times this step felt really uncomfortable and hard for me. But I did it anyway because I was committed to the work.

As a third step, in line with “Commitment,” I made it a priority to continue protecting time on my schedule to follow through on those lunch dates, even on days when I felt depleted of energy and felt like work was too busy. Last, but not least, is the fourth step I took, in line with “Courage.” And you, my friends, are all a part of that final step. I decided to take a personal risk by sharing my story about unconscious bias with all you. Remember how I mentioned that I’m an introvert? Trust me when I say that it took a lot of courage and vulnerability to write this story, but it was worth it if in doing so, I can help contribute to a growing culture of allyship and mutual accountability here at USAID.

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