

Episode #157: Exposing Affinity Bias to Create a Fair and Just Workplace



Full Episode Transcript

**With Your Host
Dr. Janel Anderson**

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Hello and welcome to another episode of the Working Conversations podcast where we talk all things leadership, business communication and trends in organizational life. I'm your host, Dr. Janel Anderson.

Today we are going to unravel one of the most insidious mysteries of the modern workplace. The fascinating yet overlooked world of affinity bias. Imagine a workplace where hiring decisions are influenced not just by qualifications, but by shared alma mater's weekend hobbies and dog ownership.

Picture a scenario where performance evaluations stretch assignments and a manager's time and attention are colored by unconscious preferences for this employee over that employee.

Affinity bias lurks in the shadows of offices shaping interactions, decisions and ultimately, the trajectory of careers. So listen in as we uncover the truth about affinity bias and explore strategies to navigate its treacherous waters. Get ready to challenge your assumptions, broaden your perspective and embark upon a journey towards a more fair and just workplace.

Affinity bias also known as similarity bias, or in group bias, is a subconscious tendency to favor individuals or groups who tend to resemble ourselves in some way.

Now, let's face it, if you're a manager, you're not going to like all of your direct reports the same amount. Likewise, when you're an employee on the team, you're not going to like all of your co workers exactly the same amount. You probably will like the ones who are like you at least a little bit more. And when we like some more than others, it predisposes us to affinity bias, where we give more of our time, attention and effort, and perhaps material rewards as well, to the ones that we have more affinity toward, and we give less of our time, energy effort, and again, perhaps material rewards to the ones we have less affinity towards.

This bias can manifest in a whole variety of forms, such as preferring people of the same gender or race or nationality or educational background, even their hobbies and interests, like if they're a dog owner or if they play golf. Essentially, affinity bias leads us to feel more comfortable with those who are more similar to us, again, often resulting in preferential treatment or opportunities for individuals who share our characteristics or that we just happen to like more.

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So let's look at how this affinity bias can play out in the workplace. One of the biggest places that it shows up with is in team dynamics. Affinity bias can influence team dynamics, leading to cliques or favoritism within teams. So employees who share common backgrounds or interests might form tighter bonds, potentially excluding or marginalizing colleagues who don't fit into these groups or these categories. And this can hinder collaboration, productivity and innovation within the team.

Now there are a bunch of different ways that even just this can show up. Let's look at a few of them. The first one is what I call the Lunch Bunch. In the cafeteria, it's like watching a scene from a high school movie, different tables for different cliques. There's the marketing mavens or the finance fanatics or the engineering Einsteins. But it's not just about lunch. It's about finding that affinity tribe and then really sticking to it like glue and not moving beyond it. And again, then potentially giving less of your time, energy and effort to others.

We also have the coffee klatch forget about the watercooler real networking happens at the espresso machine. It's where the coffee klatch gathers to discuss beans brewing methods and weekend latte art workshops. You know, the pretty leaf or heart on the top of your coffee cup. Now if you can't tell a macchiato from a mocha, you might as well be speaking a different language from these coffee fanatics.

And speaking of a different language, another group that may emerge based on their shared interests is the ball game Brigade. These avid sports enthusiast can't stop talking about last night's game, spouting statistics, rumored trades and point spreads, leaving the non sports fans feeling excluded and invisible. It can also transcend outside the workplace as well take the golf club connection, for example, who needs to actually interview for a promotion when you've got the country club?

Affinity bias strikes on the green where business deals are sealed over 18 holes I have a questionable handicap. It's not about who's qualified. It's about who can swing a club and tell a good joke on the fairway. So this might all sound like some petty in group out group issue. But there are real impacts on people's careers that are at stake when affinity bias goes unchecked. Let's look at a few of them.

The first is hiring and promotion. One of the most prevalent examples of affinity bias is in the hiring and promotion process. Managers may subconsciously gravitate towards candidates who remind them of themselves or fit into the company's existing culture, leading to a lack of diversity in the workforce. For instance, a manager who attended the same university as a job candidate might unconsciously favor that candidate over others

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with similar qualifications, but different alma maters. It could also be what part of the country they grew up in, or what part of the state they grew up in. If it was more local. It happens with races as well.

Even a fraction of a percentage of an increase in salary for one person whom the manager has more affinity towards than another when the same quality of work was performed by both of those employees can really add up over time.

Think of salary like compound interest when you earn interest on a compounding interest account. The additional interest that you earn is on top of the interest that you already earned. Now most salaries work similarly, they are rooted in percentages. So if your base salary goes up, when your colleagues and you both get raises and merit increases based as a percentage of your salary, even a slight edge, say half a percent can make a material difference.

Just a couple of years down the road. We're talking 1000s and 1000s of dollars. Another place that shows up is in the performance evaluation. Managers may unintentionally evaluate the performance of employees through the lens of affinity bias. For example, a manager might give higher performance ratings to employees who share their same communication style or work approach even if other team members are equally or more effective. The early bird rewarding the early bird, that sort of thing.

It shows up also in networking and mentorship opportunities. So affinity bias can impact networking and mentorship opportunities both within an organization as well as outside of an organization. Now employees may naturally seek out mentors or allies who resemble them, inadvertently excluding individuals from under representative groups. And this perpetuates existing inequalities and inequities and it limits career advancement for those who don't fit the traditional mold or who didn't get a mentor because they didn't fit the traditional mold.

In fact, a study from the Journal of Applied Psychology a couple of decades ago because affinity bias has been around a while. They looked at the role of affinity bias in mentorship relationships and its implications for career development. They were drawing on data from a longitudinal and they were drawing on data from a longitudinal study. So that means over a long period of time, and they were looking at both formal and informal mentoring relationships. The authors of the study looked at how demographic similarity between mentors and the proteges or the ones who were they were mentoring influences the outcome of the actual mentorship. So the results indicated that affinity bias were definite.

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Results indicated that affinity biases were definitely at work in these relationships with mentors more likely to select a protege who shared similar demographic characteristics. And then it compounds in the mentorship outcomes such as career advancement and job satisfaction. They ended up being positively associated with demographic similarity between the mentors and those being mentored or the protegees. And of course, that's going to go on to positively impact the careers of those being mentored in those relationships. And then those who did not have that same mentorship, but might have been just as talented and just as driven, get to a certain extent left behind.

So affinity bias does have real implications for career growth and development and earning potential and all the rest.

So let's look at how to overcome it. I've developed a quick and easy affinity bias test and here's how it works. First, you write down the names of all of your team members if you're an individual contributor, and put your boss's name on that list too. Now if you are managing and supervising the work of others, you're going to make the list of the people who directly report to you next to each person's name. Oh and by the way, you're going to do this on a scrap of paper that's going in the recycling or maybe even going to burn it or put it through the shredder. This does not go on your work laptop by friends. Okay, this goes on a piece of paper, and it's for your eyes only. Alright, so you've made the roster, the list of all of your colleagues or the list of your direct reports depending on if you're in a manager role or an individual contributor role.

Then on a scale of one to five, where five is I wouldn't be friends with this person outside of work even if we did not work together. And one is I would avoid this person in the grocery store. If I saw them I would duck into the next aisle and avoid them. When I in then you're going to put a number to each of the names on that roster that you created that list of people who you work with, on a scale of one to five where five is we'd be friends outside of work and one is I would avoid them at the grocery store or the department store.

Now when I administer this affinity bias test in a keynote speech or a training that I'm developing with a live audience. There is always an eruption of laughter when I talked about the ones where you would duck into the next aisle at the grocery store or the department store. And what that just indicates is that it's so relatable because we all have that person that if we saw them in the grocery store, we would want to duck into the next aisle and not to have to have a conversation with them, or maybe even acknowledge them. And sometimes it's a co worker or sometimes it's a neighbor or sometimes it's somebody from our civic organization or, or a parent whose child goes to the same school as our child. So there's lots of different ways that that can manifest but

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people laughed at it because it's relatable so they completely understand it.

Okay, once you have your roster of people made that list of people and you have assigned a number one through five, now you have your baseline for how to catch yourself in affinity bias now, where we're going to watch ourselves is on the fives for sure. Because if you have given somebody a five that means you have a high level of affinity towards them, you would be friends with them outside of work. Now this does not mean that you should not continue to have a strong working relationship with them, of course, keep the friendship key you know, because I mean, as you've probably heard me say our coworkers become our work friends become our real friends. And if that is the case, I want you to keep that person as a real friend. You do not have to change the friendship but in any way shape or form.

But when you do have to do is realize that that friendship that affinity towards that other person may incur only impact the amount of time energy and effort that you spend with that person. And if you're a hiring manager, it may also positively impact their ability to get in more interesting work, stretch assignments, better performance reviews, higher raises more opportunities for promotion, so we just have to keep it in check. We have to acknowledge our strong relationship with that person and then remind ourselves to not let that get in the way.

Now, if you think you're immune to this and you say oh Janel, I don't have any affinity bias than I am especially talking to you. Because affinity bias, really any kind of bias is one of those things that lands on a subconscious level. And until we raise it to our conscious level of awareness, we're not going to be able to do anything about it and it is going to impact our decisions and our relationships, no matter what. Now I talked about the fives.

I also want to talk about the ones so for obvious reasons. It's the opposite reasons as the as the fives but for obvious reasons. We also want to check ourselves on the ones again, you don't have to like everyone what you could do if you find yourself with someone is you could start looking for more common ground and more shared interests. So find out what they like to do outside of work, find out a little bit more about them. And it may be the case that you discover some things that you do have in common with them and then you move the dial on the affinity a little bit. And that way again, it's going to help buffer you from inadvertently not giving them time, energy, effort, promotion, opportunities, raises and so forth as they are do.

Now because I am based in Minnesota, I also have to talk about the TOS and if you are based in a place where there is any sort of passive aggressive behavior here in

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Minnesota, we call it Minnesota Nice, which is our passive aggressive term for being passive aggressive. So I also tell the Minnesota in the bunch to check themselves on the twos. So the twos on that scale of one to five are right there next to the ones but a Minnesotan or somebody who's being Minnesota Nice or passive aggressive. might say,

Oh, I'd never give somebody a one then towns mean let's give them a two. Okay, so if you're giving somebody a two, you need to check yourself on the twos just like you're checking yourself on the ones Okay, so it's the ones and the twos and fives, where we really need to check ourselves.

There's a good chance that the working relationships we have with the people that we've rated a three or four are solid, and they're working just fine and we are not unduly privileging or giving opportunity or more of our time, energy and effort to the threes and the fours. Keep in mind though, your Individual results may vary. You might give somebody a five four rather just because you don't want to give anybody a five. It's only after you've heard the whole scale and how to use this. You when you sit down to do it. You might say Oh, I'm not giving anybody a five that sounds like I'm inadvertently biasing myself towards them. And then you give them a four. So you might need to check yourself on the fours as well depending on if you are unduly influenced by the scale itself as you put the numbers to it.

Now that you know what the whole scale needs. Now there is no reason to stop liking someone as much as you do. Nor is there any absolute business reason that you must begin to like somebody more than you do if you gave them a one or two. But raise it to your level of awareness if you do have a strong relationship because you have more affinity towards one person or you have a very weak relationship because you do not like this person at all. So raise that to your level of awareness so that you are not unduly positively or negatively impacting someone's career trajectory, or the team's success for those of you who are not in a role to be giving out raises or hiring or doing performance evaluations.

Do not let affinity bias get in the way of the important work that you do. Remember, affinity bias lurks in the shadows of our offices and our workplaces. Shaping interactions decisions. And ultimately, the trajectory of our careers and our projects. My goal today in having this discussion with you is to bring it into the light so that we can see it and we can make different choices. Choices that lead to more fair and just hiring practices, performance evaluations, team dynamics, mentor relationships, project work, and oh so much more.

Because remember, the future of work is not just about technology. It's about the values

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we build the communities we build and the sustainable growth we all strive for. We need to keep exploring, keep innovating and keep envisioning the remarkable possibilities that lie ahead.

As always, stay curious. Stay informed. Stay ahead of the curve. Tune in next week for another insightful exploration of the trends shaping our professional world.

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Until next time, my friends be well.