SOMETIMES IT'S NOT YOU – IT'S THE SYSTEM



What, Who & Why

A practical guide to understanding how bias shapes
who gets to feel like they belong
and how to tell self-doubt from evidence.

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Confidence | Clarity | Courage
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It's Not You
It's the System
Using this Workbook

Unconscious bias isn't something you're imagining. It's well-documented, measurable, and it shapes decisions in ways most people never intend.

This workbook isn't about assigning blame, to yourself or to anyone else. It's intended to help you understand how bias shapes who gets to feel confident, competent and to feel like they belong.

It is possible to tell the difference between a genuine gap in your ability and a system that was never quite built with you in mind.

See your own experience as part of a documented pattern that affects many talented people, not a personal failing.

These are my reflections

.....

on ___ /___ /_____

1. It's Not You, It's the System: What?

Implicit or unconscious bias is well established by a large body of research. It's about mental shortcuts we learn to make, quick decisions our brain makes about a person or situation, built from learned social patterns, usually without our awareness.

These shortcuts are learned, unconscious, unintentional.

And they still affect our behaviour and influence our decisions:

- When professional orchestras began auditioning musicians behind a screen, far more women were selected. The music hadn't changed. What the judges could see had.
- Identical CVs were sent to research lab leaders, one with a male name and one with a female name. The "male" applicant was rated as more competent, offered more mentoring and a higher starting salary.
- In job applications, women identified as mothers were judged as less committed and less competent than otherwise identical candidates. Fatherhood didn't carry the same cost.



Recognise these situations?

- Someone with less experience is given the role because they seem more confident.
- You offer an idea that is overlooked and suddenly celebrated when someone else says the exact same thing
- You notice you’re often interrupted as others are given space to share...

None of these outcomes came from someone deciding to be unfair. They came from bias doing exactly what bias does.

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Bias often isn't intentional. It doesn't require anyone to be unkind or even consciously aware they're doing it.

It shows up in small decisions made quickly, under pressure, without time to check them.

That doesn't make it any less real or less costly to the people affected.

Recognise this?

- You soften how you speak or how much space you take up, because you've learned that your “confidence” doesn't land the same way for you as it does for others.
- People describe you as difficult or “very direct” when you ask for what you want.
- You are expected to spend more of your time supporting or supervising more junior colleagues while some peers are allowed to focus on their own work.

Sometimes we internalise these same biases against ourselves, even when we don't consciously agree with them. This can produce a vague "something's not quite right" feeling, without a clear sense of where it comes from.

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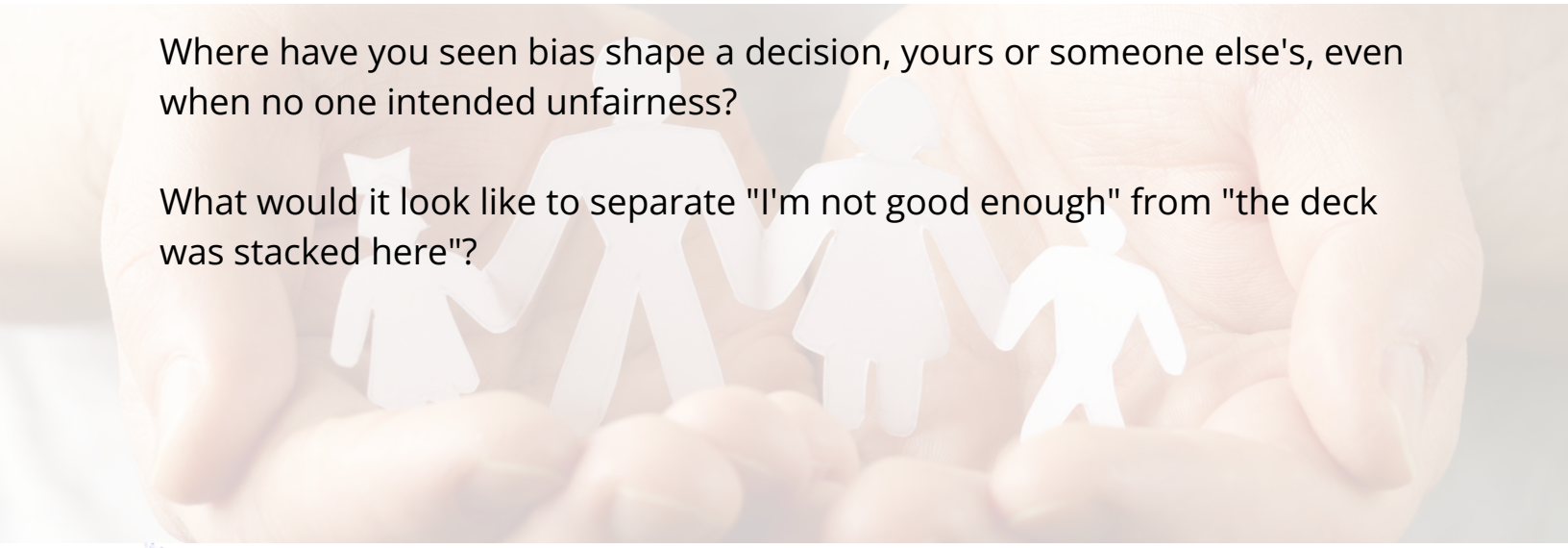
2. It's Not You, It's the System: Who?

Unconscious bias doesn't affect everyone equally.
Research consistently shows its heaviest costs fall on minorities and high-achieving women.

If you're underrepresented in your field or role the standards around what you are expected to do or to achieve may be different without anyone making a conscious decision.

- Assertive or decisive women are sometimes liked less for behaviour that would get a male colleague respect.
- Collaborative, consultative men may be seen as less authoritative or ambitious for using behaviour more expected from a woman.
- People from different socio-economic backgrounds may experience a “class ceiling” when it comes to promotions.

If your success doesn't match the stereotype of "who succeeds here" you may find you have to prove yourself again with every new challenge, or not being offered some opportunities... for example a woman with children may not be offered a leadership role if managers think it would be too demanding given her family commitments.



Where have you seen bias shape a decision, yours or someone else's, even when no one intended unfairness?

What would it look like to separate "I'm not good enough" from "the deck was stacked here"?

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3. It's Not You, It's the System: Why?

Bias persists because it's efficient, not because it's accurate.
Our brains use categories to make fast decisions and those categories get filled in by whatever we've absorbed from the culture around us, not by careful evidence.

They wanted the best players in the orchestra.
Their idea of "best" was quietly, unintentionally, shaped by what they expected a good musician to look like.

(Goldin, C. and Rouse, C. (2000) 'Orchestrating impartiality: the impact of 'blind' auditions on female musicians', American Economic Review, Vol. 90, No. 4, pp. 715–741.)

They wanted the best science to be funded.
Their idea of "best" was quietly, unintentionally, shaped by what they expected a good scientist to look like.

Witteman, H. O., Hendricks, M., Straus, S., & Tannenbaum, C. (2019). Are gender gaps due to evaluations of the applicant or the science? A natural experiment at a national funding agency. The Lancet, 393(10171), 531–540. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)32611-4

They wanted the best people to be promoted.
Their idea of "best" was quietly, unintentionally, shaped by the family background of the people they selected.

Morgan, A. C., LaBerge, N., Larremore, D. B., Galesic, M., Brand, J. E., & Clauset, A. (2022). Socioeconomic roots of academic faculty. Nature Human Behaviour, 6, 1625–1633.

"Many talented researchers begin the race from different starting lines.
Some have inherited the map. Others have to draw it as they go."

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4. It’s Not You, It’s the System - So what?

Sometimes it's not you at all. It's the system.

Unconscious bias is real, well-documented, and rarely intentional. Knowing this doesn't erase the feeling. But it changes how you interpret what the feeling means.

Self-doubt and structural bias can look identical from the inside.

Only one of them is about you.

Reflections

What would change if you asked:
"Is this about my ability, or about the system I'm working in?"
the next time self-doubt shows up?



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WANT MORE?



This workbook helps you tell the difference between genuine self-doubt and the weight of bias you didn't create and can't fix alone.

Recognising the system doesn't remove it.
It does mean you stop carrying blame that was never only yours to carry.

You can work with initiatives designed to reduce bias and discrimination and, as a bystander and an ally, work with your colleagues to raise awareness and create better, fairer conditions for all.

I hope this content has been useful. If you know you need more, do reach out to me. I'd love to hear from you.

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You can always explore the other resources on my website.

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Let me know how you get on!

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