

My inspiration – Episode 6 - Understand unconscious bias and how it impacts you

Romaine Johnstone/ Sandra Filleaudau I'm Romaine Johnstone and I'm Sandra Filleaudau,

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Sandra Filleaudau Here's what you can expect from each of the seven episodes we'll be airing.

Romaine Johnstone Each month you'll discover an honest conversation on key aspects of what it means to better own your career and your self-development.

Sandra Filleaudau Some real life examples taken from Romaine coaching experience and our own lives, as well as tools to help you better understand yourself, others and your relationships.

Romaine Johnstone: and we'll always wrap up with a practical exercise for you to stop implementing these concepts in your own life.

Sandra Filleaudau Our ambition is for you to feel energized and empowered after listening to these episodes, so enjoy and share with anyone you think may benefit from the episodes. Of course, I'm not biased.

Sandra Filleaudau: Hi, Romaine.

Romaine Johnstone: Hi, Sandra.

Sandra Filleaudau: So today's topic is a topic that fascinates me. We're going to talk about unconscious bias and unconscious bias has gotten a lot of attention recently, especially in the context of gender diversity. So let's dive in immediately. And I think you wanted to start with a test.

Romaine Johnstone: Yeah, that's right. So we've decided to always have a test in our podcast and this time we're going to start with it rather than finish with it. So this great little test was designed by Media Partners, which is an organization based in Washington and the state of Washington in the US and this test is for listeners, too. So listen carefully, Sandra, and all of you listen very carefully and more than share what happens for you. So, Sandra, how do you feel about a person who goes to church, goes hunting, votes for the other candidate, doesn't eat meat, has tattoos, wears the headscarf, doesn't believe in marriage, takes up two seats in the bus, owns an electric car, didn't go to university, doesn't speak English, doesn't have a job, wears a hoodie, voted for Brexit, is over 60 years old, has a beard, loves small dogs. So how did that feel, Sandra?

Sandra Filleaudau: I could feel myself tense up at certain moments and had images of stereotypes pop into my mind. You mentioned certain others.

Romaine Johnstone: And tell me when you're conscious of your brain sorting people into groups?

Sandra Filleaudau: Absolutely, definitely,

Romaine Johnstone: It's kind of a verminous happening. Tell me a little bit more about these groups.

Sandra Filleaudau: Verminous, yeah, definitely, so, you can. Well, first of all, you put yourself into one of those categories. So when you mentioned, you know, go you either do or you don't do the things you mentioned or it's definitely you put yourself into a category really.

Romaine Johnstone: That's right and if you're not in that category, how do you see the others?

Sandra Filleaudau: Different, potentially threatening, depending on how you feel on the different topics that you mentioned. But different. You know what? It reminds me of a test that Tina Nielsen did in her TED talk on nudge behavior for a more inclusive world. I know you loved Tina Nielsen as much as I do, and she showed two pictures. One was of a man with a bald head and a beard. Not particularly smiling and the other picture was that of a smiling man in a suit, and then she asked people in the audience to rate the two men in terms of whether they made them feel safe and whether they trusted the men wanted to do them good. So I'm not going to spoil. But the results were just amazing and eye opening in terms of identifying our own biases and prejudice. So what is unconscious bias? What's the mechanism that's at play in our minds when we do this? When we switch?

Romaine Johnstone : So, yeah, I thank you for having her for having mentioned Tina Nielsen, because indeed, it's somebody who's very important to me in the context of unconscious bias and I was lucky enough to meet her in Paris and to attend one of her conferences and have a chat with her, so what's unconscious bias? So, unconscious bias, if you like, refers to the quick assessment or judgements that we make about situations and people just like you did there spontaneously. It's often defined as prejudice just or unsupported judgements in favor of or against one thing, one person or one group, because we often think of it against someone, a bias that can be thing for other and so in a way usually considered unfair. But it could be inclusive and therefore unfair to others as a result of that.

So as a result of bias, unconscious bias, certain people benefit and others are obviously penalized and so, yeah, I'm sure that all of us are thinking, oh, yeah, I've been victim of that. But actually, we're not only victims of unconscious bias, we are all and I promise you, all perpetrators, actors, if you like, of unconscious bias all the time.

Sandra Filleaudau: Yeah. Even if we don't like to admit it. But we are and I'm guessing this has to do with something that's going on in the brain that we're not quite aware of. Can you explain the mechanism?

Romaine Johnstone: Yeah, absolutely. So that the human brain is a kind of pattern making machine. It sorts visual clues, verbal clues, behavior clues, in other words, it's what it sees, what it hears and what it experiences and it puts them into kind of boxes and this sorting helps us, for example, to quickly and quickly is the operative word to quickly determine whether someone is friendly or hostile. And that goes back to what we discussed in Episode four of the of my inspiration podcast, A Stress Management. It's all about basic survival. So just to remind you in a few words what we talked about. We're all familiar with the image of a lion devouring a prey and you know that picture, too, don't you, Sandra? And the notion

that's associated with it is fight or flee. What do we do when we see a lion? Do we fight or do we flee and we run away. You see something or someone that you see as dangerous. You shy away from it or you run away from it. But the same way you see someone is something that you've processed, that your brain has processes reassuring. You're drawn to them. You're attracted to them. You want to go towards them. You've got a positive unconscious bias. So and research has shown and these figures are from Encyclopedia Britannica that our body sends. Wait for this. Our body sends our brain. Eleven million bits per second of information. Eleven million bits of information per second. And yet the brain can only process 50 of them. OK. So much of the brain. What the brain does. Goes beyond our own awareness. And which means that I, in fact, our unconscious mind. So beyond what we're conscious of, processes 200000 times more information than our frontal lobes, which is what we call the neocortex, you know, and everything moves so fast.

So why does the brain go into this pattern as quiet as the brain acts as a pattern making machine, if you like, want it? Why? Why do we do that? Because we form neural pathways. And these neural pathways become stronger every time these associations are recognized and unconsciously confirmed, if you like. So that's what we call hard wiring. So we see white male engineers. Our brains learn that engineers are white and male. That makes sense.

Sandra Filleaudau: It does. It does.

Romaine Johnstone: In fact, it's actually pleasing to the brain is reassured, if you like. When this associate is confirmed. So if they see a white male engineer, well, they're reassured. So it just reinforces, if you like, the bias. It's a confirmation of something that's ringing a bell for the brain, so on the other hand, if we use the same example, if we come across an Asian female engineer, it challenges are unconscious association and it's slightly unsettling if even if we're not conscious of being unsettled. It doesn't quite fit and as a result, we are more likely to we don't necessarily do it every time but we are more likely to unconsciously bias against the Asian female engineer, mean, isn't that crazy? So we all develop kind of unintentional people preferences, if you like.

Sandra Filleaudau: But, so if our brains are wired for this bias. What can we do about it? I mean is the key, for example, making unconscious bias as conscious as possible to tone down its impact? Because there's the bias itself, but then there's the impact that it has on our behavior, which is the more problematic part.

Romaine Johnstone: Yeah, absolutely. You're spot on. So how do we react? Because of that, what do we say?

Sandra Filleaudau: Yeah. Because we can't help the unconscious bias. That's just the way our brain is our work.

Romaine Johnstone: Yeah. But you're absolutely right. We can consciously try to rewire our neural pathways. We can learn to think differently. We can learn to check us. We can learn to not jump to conclusions. So, in effect, we can learn to slow right down our decision making process and this gentleman called Daniel Kahneman in his book Thinking Fast and Slow, which is dated 2011, I think, who popularized the notion of two systems in the human mind.

He calls them systems, one thinking and systems to thinking. So systems one thinking is when we operate automatically and quickly with little or no effort and with no sense of voluntary control, we just don't think see something.

We just decide. So that systems one thinking is a kind of danger detector. It has its purpose. It's very useful. Let to set off an alarm bell in our heads when we're in danger. But it is prone to error. Whenever we do anything too fast, we make mistakes, don't we? So that's a in a life or death situation, obviously, because it's going to save us. But it's not brilliant in our normal relationships, whether at work or in the private sphere, because we can misinterpret what's happening or we can base it on an experience which actually is actually quite different. What we're experiencing it now. And so that's the systems, one thinking and so systems to thinking on the other hand, it's slow and conscious, systems two thinking requires and effort. It requires intention, it requires focus and it is based on deduction rather than automation, so you have to slow the automation right down, gather some facts and figures and then make a deduction.

So it's much more reliable, but it requires time and it requires a conscious desire. As I said, to check oneself slow down to challenge our first impressions about something or someone, you know, hearing about a white male engineer sounds coherent. He doesn't come across as bizarre in our head. That's it stands one thinking at work. But if we make an effort to not be surprised or to be curious about what's happening, we are seeing or hearing an Asian female engineer that systems to thinking at work. Did you know what I'm saying?

Sandra Filleaudau: Absolutely

Romaine Johnstone: So, you can you can see that unconscious judgements and prejudices, rather than protecting us from danger, can actually sometimes lead us to label and stereotype and use that word stereotype when I did the test. What that results in prejudice and discrimination and rejection of a particular community, a particular vem.

Sandra Filleaudau: Yes. So where do all these unconscious associations and unintentional people preferences, where they come from?

Romaine Johnstone: Ok, that's so a little bit like values that we talked about in our first podcast. They come, of course, from nature and nurture. They come from our socialisation and from experience, mainly in terms of what we're talking about. So we're talking about media exposure. We're talking about family. We're talking about school. We're talking about friends. We're talking about what we have experience our life experiences. Talk about, well, work culture as well. You know, and all that. All those elements together overtime construct are systems, one thinking world, if you like it. They create on your own connexions, neural connexions and that's how we become hardwired to have certain ideas about people and about situations.

Sandra Filleaudau: It's funny, I there's an example I'd like to share a very recent one. So we're recording this in the context of a global pandemic and of people being in their own homes and struggling to fit in, you know, caring for kids and work and everything and my my son's teacher shared a little video that was done by the Playmobil company to explain the virus to children and it's a very nice video. I mean, it's a great way of explaining to them, you know, what's going on and how the virus sort of moves from one person to the other.

And as a firm believer in an equal sharing of household tasks and work and stuff like that, I was shocked by the characters in the in the movie. Now, you know, little Playmobil

characters, they were showing the mother's cooking and the father's working. You know, all the kids were playing and I thought, please, you know, this is 2020.

Romaine Johnstone: I know.

Sandra Filleaudau: And they're still showing that example of, you know, the father's working, the mother's cooking and I thought, you know what?

Romaine Johnstone: If it's shocking.

Sandra Filleaudau: It is and that going back to your example on media exposure and that contributes to hardwiring into people's brains that's what men are supposed to do and that's what women are supposed to do. Anyway, just a quick example that does to show that how that how those wiring's are reconfirmed and which leads me to my next question, because you talked about different kinds of biases which are that are the most common ones that we that we that we experience.

Romaine Johnstone: Yes. So thank you for your example and that's definitely one type of bias. So the different types of biases are so many. I mean, not get a mention a few, but there are so many. Just you know, you can all look these up on the Internet. So one of what is a funny one, I think, is called the halo and horn. You know, the halo is over names for head. So Halo short, positive or negative, first impressions. So Halo around the head, the person who can't put a foot wrong. You see them and you think, whatever he does, whatever he says, whatever they say is gonna be. And the horn they can't do anything right and we have this opinion about some people in our lives that whatever they say or do is going to be wrong and say you've heard of negative feedback from someone who's just being transferred to your team. Well, you know, you're likely going to consider them negatively before they even introduce themselves. You don't know them, but you've heard negative feedback. You're going to see them with a horn unless you check yourself, i let you check yourself. So Halo and as one affinity bias. This is so common favour people who share the same social backgrounds, the same school as you. The same sometimes even the same village who look or sound like one of us and I'm talking, you know, both when I'm talking about kind of education is talking about both initial and, of course, higher education in France and I had this crushing, you know, something about recruiting clones. And that's how we a lot of us build our networks and how we how we make recommendations. So sometimes regardless of the talents of the skills and talents of the people who were talking about, you know, we ignore the faults of the people we like and we noticed the fault of the people we don't and we're just you know, that's our affinity because we like those people. So that's something that we all do. We've got to be careful of that gender bias we gave a beautiful example and that is exactly that and men suffer from it as much as women, you know. Confirmation bias, so that's the kind of the fourth one that I want to mention noticing or looking for evidence which confirms our ideas, good or bad and reinforces origin, our original point of view. I have to admit a bias, okay? I have a natural bias to someone who speaks another language, why do I have a positive natural bias to someone who speaks another language? Because I'm projecting myself and I think that they may have the same passion for diversity and inclusion as I have.

But that is so wrong. How do I know that, you know, this is all about predicting and making things up and dreaming things up in my head. That's for them what's called confirmation bias and maybe one last one, is that OK?

Romaine Johnstone: So social comparison bias. I have a feeling more dislike or competitiveness with someone or a group of people that are seen as physically or mentally better than you or not quite so good, so do you have an example for that, Sandra?

Sandra Filleaudau: Yeah. I mean, I can definitely relate to that. But there's also something I wanted to show that I noticed a while ago and that I found interesting in reversing the bias. So I think tonight, one of the people I follow is a woman who specializes in all things related to Block chain. I mean, she does a really fantastic job of making a topic that's potentially pretty complex, much easier to grasp and so one day I was reading an article mentioning another block chain expert, you know, with a foreign name. So I couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman. And I caught myself picturing that person as a woman because in my mind, block chain is associated with this woman, I fall on linked in and that really got me thinking, you know, back to the example and so on Playmobil about the power of role models and how important it is to display diversity in a very conscious way to train, you know, to hardwire our minds differently. Do you have an example to share a similar something similar that you've experienced woman?

Romaine Johnstone: Yeah, this is gonna be a little bit of vulnerability here so bear with me. So in the coaching, well, we're generally competing with other coaches for contracts. You probably know that so far in the corporate world. So in other words or even in the individual world, personal wealth. We're introduced to the person to be coached to the coaches in other words, that's what we call it and it's generally not the H.R. manager who chooses the coach for coaching contract and so I had we have what we call these chemistry meetings with the coaches who then decides and I had a chemistry meeting. I was up against two other coaches, a man and a woman so there were three of us, the coaches was a woman and the long and short of it is that I didn't get the job. The man did and guess what? This is horrendous, I was reassured, that it was the man that decision. I was reassured.

Sandra Filleaudau: Why?

Romaine Johnstone: Because I told myself that it made sense that he was a man, because he was a man, he had an edge over me. This is horrendous and he was like, he was probably a better coach than I and you know even saying this now, three years later, I kind of feel shame when I say that and I was also reassured because I thought the case of the coach who was a woman. It makes sense that she should have preferred to work with a man. Can you believe that?

So when I came to realize that these two thoughts went through my head and that I felt okay about him being a man rather than a woman, it would have been even worse if he had been a woman. It would be in direct competition was a real shock to me. So I couldn't admit this for a whole year. And now I'm happy to talk about it. I'm happy to own it and I'm happy to show my vulnerability, actually.

Sandra Filleaudau: And it's funny because I remember I distinctly remember when that happened to you because we were working together on a project and how upset you were and it seems that you were even more upset from your reaction by your reaction than you were of not getting the job. Because despite everything that you know and the values that are that are very dear to you. You had made that assumption that because he was the man and he was probably more capable than you were of completing the job. I had a similar experience of realizing my own biases. Have you ever taken the project implicit test

developed by researchers at Harvard. So for our listeners, there's researchers at Harvard that developed this test. That's called the project implicit test it. And they there are several tests on attributes such as gender, age, race, weight, country, lots of them and I took the test on gender, you know, figuring that with everything that I knew and what a fierce advocate I am for gender diversity, I would have, you know, very little bias. But I was totally wrong. And it really upset me, too. So I would definitely encourage your listeners to go take that test because it's pretty eye opening.

Romaine Johnstone: Yeah It is, You're right

Sandra Filleaudau: So that being said, could you detail the impact of bias itself at home and at work?

Romaine Johnstone: Yeah. So are bias takes us to strange places and does it result in a lack of diversity in our relationships, in our networks, in our teens. It sometimes results in discomfort and fear in public transport. It results in the comfort of being with those who are like us. That's an expression in English, which is birds of a feather flock together and it's also takes us to a place of lack of motivation and disengagement of the marginalized person. You feel the odd one out, do you feel like a square peg in a round hole, I love that expression. And it makes me think of my daughters, it reminds me of my daughters when we first arrived in France in a small village school after having been in London for seven years and they really felt like a square peg in a round hole. And they were the only ones when they arrived in this village school to speak English.

There was in terms of diversity, there was only one person of colour in the class and they were stigmatized from day one and for my eldest daughter, who was older by the time he arrived in Paris and she went to D.C., she said on her first day back, it was it felt like coming home. So her from her first day in this day in Paris Okay we had never lived here. Everything had changed in her world and she said it's feels like coming home and then I attended a very mixed public state school with international sections in Paris. So there we go that's my story.

Sandra Filleaudau: To wrap up, could you give us some concrete tips on things to look out for, on ways to maybe tone down System one thinking and give priority the system to thinking?

Romaine Johnstone: Yeah, just a few tips and that is for us to actually implement and take them out there and do things with them because you don't learn to swim in a book, as one of my dear colleague says. So it's hard to avoid unconscious bias, the systems, one thinking is going on all the time and systems to thinking which can help isn't quite it isn't quick to come on board to the rescue and to keep things in check. So given all of that, here some ideas for ways to try to avoid bias. We recognize, we all have bias, so awareness is so precious and Arnold Mindell, who's an American author, therapist and a fabulous teacher who said Harmonie is a wonderful thing, but not half as powerful as awareness. So that means that if you are aware of conflict, it is all already more powerful than the harmony that hides potential conflict. So recognized we have bias awareness is key. Stop and think. Question of first impressions. Challenge our negative assumptions and stereotypes and discuss these differences. Put the matter on the table and talk about them. Ensure everyone is heard that's another thing in your family and your partnerships and your team. Even those who never say anything. Give a voice to every little, you know, other voice in the system. Find other ways for people to be able to express themselves, be creative and seek

difference, too. Research has shown that difference or variety, if you like, in a team when a partnership supports healthier relationships and better performance. Yeah, seek different team and in a partnership, you will have better performance, you will have healthier performance. Be open to feedback and don't take it too personally. Don't take it from a place of ego. Check yourself, if somebody says to you something to you gives you some negative feedback between brackets. What if there were. What if they were two percent truth in that feedback and just that two percent truth just takes the edge off it. Think positive examples are role models. Don't be too hard on yourself. That's really, really important. You know, the emotional impact makes bias more like you said. Don't be too hard on yourself and more than anything, have fun. That's what I want to say. Have fun when you're thinking about bias and checking yourself and looking for diversity.

Sandra Filleaudau: Thank you so much Romaine, I'm sure this episode as has really got listeners to checking their behavior and we're almost at the time of our final episode in which we'll be talking about change, which is a really great way to close the season. So I can't wait. Thank you so much.

Romaine Johnstone: This will be particularly important, the subject of change will be particularly important in the context of the pandemic that we're going through right now and change in our lives and what that means to us all and what's looking to happen. So thank you all for listening. Thank you, Sandra, for you. Your questions, your time and listeners. It's now over to you.

Sandra Filleaudau: Thank you.

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