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BUSINESS WORLD

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Breaking bias in the modern workplace

We've all heard the term bias but what does it really mean and how does it show itself in businesses? In this article we will consider what biases women face in the workplace and how we can all take steps to overcome them to forge better, more inclusive environments for all.

What is bias?

Bias is complex. We all have bias and stereotypes both conscious and subconscious. Relying on these snap judgements can be useful at times, particularly in times of danger, but making snap judgements about people can be harmful. In the workplace, bias can appear in many forms such as:

- undervaluing an individual because of their age or gender, such as assuming a woman is an administrator rather than her actual position as team leader
- accusing women of being over-emotional or bossy while accepting the same behaviour from a man as assertiveness or strong leadership
- listening to or valuing the opinion of a male colleague more than a female colleague even when they have the same opinions
- assuming that someone will behave a particular way because of their gender, beliefs, sexuality or where they're from.

People of all genders can consciously or unconsciously make biased comments or behave in a way that disadvantages women, so counteracting this takes work and dedication. Knowing bias exists isn't enough. Bias can have a big influence on people's daily lives, their opportunities, and their mental and physical health; we need to not only be aware of bias but also take steps to counteract it.

By recognising bias in yourself and others, you can mitigate the effects by taking time to make measured decisions and speak up when you see or experience biased behaviour.

Why is fighting bias important?

The pandemic has had a profound impact on everyone and has exacerbated existing equality issues in the workplace.

Research from McKinsey has shown that three in four women experience bias at work and those who do are more likely to leave their jobs. Add this to the resignations and redundancies arising from the pandemic and the impact is big.

Businesses need to act now to promote, hire and retain women and break the biases that they face in the workplace. As movements such as International Women's Day and Pride demonstrate, there is a desire to create a bias-free world free without stereotypes and discrimination – one where difference is valued and celebrated.

Not just for women

Everyone can play a role in creating a better environment for women; we need advocacy, inclusive mindsets and tangible action from men and women. Crucially, the rise of women is not about the fall of men; it's about equality for all.

It can be difficult for men to know how best to support women in the workplace. The most important thing is to be an ally. The International Women's Development Agency describes male allyship as a welcome amplification of women's voices. Men must support female colleagues, listen to them, and call out biased behaviour. Gender equality isn't just about improving the lives of women. It's about challenging all forms of damaging gender bias.

Ask female colleagues what they need, don't assume. For example, don't avoid giving women work when they return from maternity leave because you don't want to overburden them. Although well-intentioned bias, it underestimates women's abilities. Instead, ask how they feel about their workload and the amount that they would feel comfortable doing.

Forbes suggests two ways in which men can be better allies:

1. listen to women and pay attention to the specific ways in which they want to be supported
2. know when to step back and when to step in.

Strategies to fight bias

There are many steps men and women can take to reduce bias. Women's mentoring and support group Lean In suggests these strategies.



About the author

Sharon De Mendonca *Douglas, Isle of Man*

Sharon joined Suntera Global, a member of Russell Bedford International, as the Global Head of HR in September 2020. As a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, Sharon is highly experienced in human resources with over 20 years' experience. Sharon has held a number of senior HR roles including at board level and has operated across a wide range of jurisdictions including Asia, Caribbean and Europe. This has included the delivery of acquisitions across multiple locations, leading and managing change and building operational capability.

In 2021, Sharon was promoted to the group's leadership team as Chief People Officer where she will be focusing on leading and developing the strategic direction of HR and its alignment to wider business strategy across all Suntera Global offices.



Speak up for someone in the moment

Someone's actions can have a great impact when someone is facing bias at work. For example:

- remind people of a colleague's talents when they have been overlooked.
- ask to hear from someone who was interrupted in a conversation.
- correct someone who says something incorrect, perhaps assuming a woman is more junior than she is.

Ask a probing question

Ask questions that encourage others to examine their thinking, such as, 'what makes you say that?' or 'can you give me an example of that?' This can help people uncover bias in their own thinking. However, do not embarrass or humiliate, sometimes bias is unconscious; instead, offer it as an opportunity to learn and see a new perspective.

Stick to the facts

When possible, eliminate bias by directing a conversation towards concrete, neutral information if someone's biased opinion is steering the conversation. For example, if someone makes a subjective or biased comment in a meeting, refocus attention back to the agenda or the facts at hand.

Advocate for change

If you notice recurring bias at work, talk to your HR or leadership teams. Raise the issue and suggest any solutions or best practices that could reduce bias for your colleagues.

Forging gender parity can seem like a huge task, and you may wonder what impact one person can make. It is incumbent on everyone to end bias:

- start with the small steps
- celebrate the little wins
- speak to employees and act on their feedback to improve areas that matter to them.

Listening to your employees and making changes in your business will have immeasurable effects on productivity, engagement and more. Yes, you will need to invest some time and creativity, but this is no different to how business had to respond rapidly and creatively to the pandemic. If we can do that, we can do anything. Start today on the path to women's equality by challenging the bias both in and around you.

News in brief

Seattle firm Clark, Raymond & Company CPA PLLC joins Russell Bedford

Russell Bedford has extended its North American coverage with the appointment of Clark, Raymond & Company CPA PLLC as its member firm in Seattle, USA. The firm has provided assurance, advisory and tax services to privately held businesses, non-profit organisations, and individuals throughout the north-western United States for more than 30 years.

Grau & Partner becomes Russell Bedford's second member in Frankfurt

Russell Bedford has expanded its German coverage by appointing Grau & Partner, another full-service firm, in the Frankfurt Rhine-Main metropolitan area. The five-partner firm has 50 personnel and offers a broad range of auditing, tax consulting, accounting, and business advisory services.

Russell Bedford adds to its recent awards by winning Wellbeing Initiative of the Year

Russell Bedford International won the Wellbeing Initiative of the Year award at the 2022 International Accounting Bulletin Awards ceremony, which took place at the iconic Waldorf Hilton in London on Wednesday, 29 June 2022. As winners, Russell Bedford provided measurable evidence of its wellbeing initiative, which improved the wellbeing of its members over the past year and included testimonials that demonstrate how Russell Bedford supported them.

Russell Bedford opens in Kosovan capital Prishtina

Russell Bedford Kosova – Audit LLC, becomes the network's first ever Kosovan member firm in Prishtina, extending the network's coverage in Southeast Europe. The firm's focus is on advisory and external audits for domestic entities and international financing institutions.

Geneva Convention: Fountain of Inspiration

After two years of online conferences, it was a pleasure to resume the Russell Bedford International Tax & EMEA Conference as an in-person event which took place at the luxurious Fairmont Grand Hotel, Geneva on 20-22 May located on the magnificent Lake Geneva, Switzerland.

Jerroms Miller Specialist Tax launches

Russell Bedford's West Midlands, UK member firm, Jerroms, has launched an exciting new merger between the firm's corporate tax team and Pete Miller, one of the most prominent figures in UK corporate tax.

Proud In Pro Co Ltd joins Russell Bedford as its member in Bangkok

Russell Bedford has grown its APAC coverage by appointing CPA firm, Proud in Pro Co Ltd as a member firm in Bangkok, Thailand. Established in 2018 by the managing partner, Sansanee Poolsawat, a CPA with some 20 years' experience of auditing in Thailand, Proud in Pro is a three-partner firm located in Bangkok's central Bang Rak district.

Russell Bedford Asia-Pacific Meeting 2022

The 2022 Russell Bedford Asia-Pacific Meeting was held on Thursday 7 and Friday 8 July at the Four Points by Sheraton, Singapore. Russell Bedford welcomed delegates from 14 firms, across 16 cities and 12 countries, demonstrating growing connections in Asia and Australia.

IAB includes Russell Bedford in its Future of Work supplement

Russell Bedford has partnered with the International Accounting Bulletin in its Future of Work supplement. The publication, which was released in June 2022, featured two pieces from Russell Bedford: 'Employee engagement and wellbeing – looking after our greatest asset', and a case study on Russell Bedford's Young Leaders' event, staged in Lisbon, Portugal in November 2021.



Russell Bedford International
3rd Floor, Paternoster House
St Paul's Churchyard
London EC4M 8AB
United Kingdom

T: +44 20 7410 0339
E: info@russellbedford.com
W: www.russellbedford.com