Perception, in the context of how potential guests will perceive the value of the experience compared to the effort and cost, is often discussed as a barrier to snowsports entry. But there is a hidden variable to the guest’s perception that can undermine efforts resorts are making to solve these ongoing challenges. It’s unconscious bias, which all humans have, that guides our judgments and actions.

Even those with the best intentions behave in biased ways without ever realizing it. This institutionalized behavior has disparate impacts on people from different backgrounds. Unconscious bias affects how we recruit, hire, train and consider team members for promotion. It affects activities from the marketing of our resorts to ensuring that team members are willing and able to deliver on your brand promises.

Think about that. Is it possible that resort leaders and team members unconsciously demonstrate a preference for certain guest and employee demographics — welcoming some and subtly or even overtly discouraging others?

How to Build a More Inclusive Team & Enhance the Guest Experience

By Laura Moriarty, Principal, Tahoe Training Partners

Editor’s Note: This article originally ran in the Winter 2019 issue of the NSAA Journal and has been updated to reflect the most recent resurgence of racial unrest in the U.S. as well as new educational opportunities that have been developed out of that context.

THE UNCONSCIOUS BRAIN

New research in the fields of neuroscience and social psychology has shed light on unintended people preferences. These are preferences formed by our personal experiences, by how we were socialized as children and young adults, and how we have been affected by media representations of different groups. Our experiences act as social filters in which we make assessments and judgments of the people around us. When we are under pressure, are short on time or don’t pay attention, unconscious biases are triggered more easily.

On any given day, guest-facing team members may perceive individuals as more or less physically or even intellectually able to participate successfully, or they may make assumptions about guests’ level of affluence, viewing them as lesser-value customers. As an example, consider the way snow-play enthusiasts who don’t purchase lift tickets are often regarded: as people who probably don’t have the physical expertise, who may not be able to afford a lift ticket, or even have the “sophistication” to ski or snowboard.
In other words, your employees may judge the book by its cover without even realizing it. Humans have a natural tendency to place each other in social categories based on visual cues, including gender, cultural background, body size and height, as well as political affiliation, job roles, and religious identity, to name a handful. And, to be fair, our brain does this because it must. The subconscious brain processes 11 million bits of information in a second. In that same time, the conscious brain processes only 40 bits. If we had to process everything consciously, the day would be so exhausting, we’d never get through it! To help us function, our brain takes shortcuts.

These shortcuts — when applied to characteristics, traits and behaviors of a certain group of people — are called stereotypes, and they apply not only to the assumptions we make about guests, but also to the assumptions we make about our own employees. For example, if women are broadly categorized as teachers and nurses, or only as ticket sellers or food workers in base areas, rather than performing on-mountain roles, and men are viewed as organizational leaders, on-mountain snowmakers and lift mechanics, these associations become hardwired within the human brain. When we hold negative stereotypes, unconscious bias can arise.

Herein lies the problem. Our biases tend to manifest in how we actually feel about people and in how we treat them, whether preferentially or non-preferentially. Affinity bias — a marked preference for those we relate to the most — is institutionalized in American organizations, including the ski business. This bias has unintentionally created a good-old-boys’ network, making upward mobility more accessible for white men. We tend to recruit, hire, and promote individuals who look like us, sound like us, and have last names like us.

When we have an affinity for someone with similar characteristics and traits, we tend to support their ideas. We may even regularly go for coffee, lunch, or beers after work together, all positive behaviors that can strengthen rapport and bonds. If we do not have that affinity, we may find ourselves questioning the person’s suitability for a certain role and doubt their competence or performance. This can lead to showing a general disregard for that person, where we rudely take a call or text when they’re trying to talk to us, cut them off, or ignore their comments in a meeting. These may seem like small issues, but they can fracture the morale of a team, create work silos, and lead to undeserved and unfair treatment, even termination, of a person.

**HOW CONSCIOUS ARE WE?**

Most of us may think we treat people fairly, but we aren’t always fully aware of our own biases (or willing to admit that we have them). When we are truly honest with ourselves about how we assess someone else, we may realize that we aren’t being as impartial as we would like to think.

The following statistics are worthy of reflection. A January 2018 report from the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program revealed that the millennial generation is now 44% non-white, nearly a quarter of the total U.S. population, and two-fifths of the working age population. The report underscores the impact millennials will have as America prepares for its first non-white majority generation, which will succeed them.²

So, when will the ski industry truly reflect the diversity of the greater population? According to Dave Belin, director of consulting services at RRC Associates, overall, 92% of skiers are white. Interestingly, the number of white participants drops to 78% when you look at snowboarding, down to 75% for younger skiers and riders aged 18 to 34. While that’s still only 25% non-white representation among snowsports participants at best, these findings suggest two important strategies for the industry to increase diversity: emphasize snowboarding as a key entry point, and retain skiers and snowboarders into their 20s and early 30s as they get older and start having children.

A word of caution against being too self-confident about your resort’s current success attracting both non-white guests and team members. Even if you are beginning to see an uptick in participation, don’t assume it’s because of your deliberate efforts to spread the word and lay out the welcome mat. That increase may be primarily relative to your proximity to a major ...
metropolitan area like the Bay Area, Los Angeles, or along the 91 and 89 interstate corridors in New Hampshire and Vermont, respectively.

One way to help make the sport feel more accessible to non-white participants is with appealing marketing images, starting with your website. Audit your web page for inclusive images and assess how marketing and sales might more directly target certain populations. And, you might disrupt conventional thinking by reigniting the potential of tubing and snow-play areas as stepping stones to the purchase of lift tickets. This is an opportunity to indulge in conscious affinity bias and view these demographics as potential skiers and riders.

I recently Googled the terms “skiers” and “snowboarders” without specifying any qualifiers and was not surprised that the images that emerged were largely homogenous. Although we are conscious of the importance of showcasing families, and are much less likely to limit action shots to male skiers and riders, the industry has historically excluded images of non-white snow enthusiasts on resort webpages and in marketing materials.

Why don’t we notice this? It is not a deliberate effort to exclude people; it’s unconscious. It’s likely no one at the decision-making table reflects the diversity that could be represented in media images. Make an effort to select imagery that is more diverse. You might even ask a person of color to critique your website and other marketing collateral. I’d be willing to bet they’ll have some useful, enlightening feedback.

**OUR NATIONAL MOMENT OF RECKONING**

In the time since this article was originally published toward the beginning of 2019, our awareness of racial injustice has intensified. Cellphone video captured incidents and social media fed mainstream coverage of the killing of unarmed people of color.

On May 25, 2020, national outrage was sparked by video footage showing a white officer in Minneapolis kneeling on George Floyd’s neck for more than 8 minutes while he was in police custody for allegedly using a counterfeit bill. Mr. Floyd was heard repeatedly saying “I can’t breathe.” Two autopsies later, Floyd’s death was found to be a homicide, and the officers involved are being prosecuted.

This incident and other high profile, needless deaths of people of color have brought about the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, and Americans have raised their voices demanding justice in ongoing marches and protests. Demonstrations have proliferated in every state and around the world. Protesters point to an entrenched bias in law enforcement and are calling for sweeping changes.

The groundswell of this modern-day civil rights movement is also precipitating change outside of police reform. Sports franchises are under pressure to remove mascot and team names considered offensive. Confederate monuments, statues, plaques and street signs that glorify America’s original sin of slavery are being dismantled. Mark Roosevelt, the great-grandson of Teddy Roosevelt, has advocated the removal of the famous statue of his ancestor on horseback flanked by a Native American and an African man, which was unveiled in 1940 in front of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. Roosevelt opined:

“We are, all of us in this country, bound together by the tragedy of racial subjugation and continuing violence and multiple other affronts to Black Americans and other people of color. Those of us with power and influence who say we wish to do better are diminished by our stalled, failed, and woefully insufficient attempts to actually do so.”

Amid this call for racial justice, the escalating pandemic has disproportionately impacted Black, Latino and Indigenous communities. The intersectionality between race, health and environmental inequality has come to the forefront as people
Factors that may influence our assessment of others include:

- Appearance, height, weight
- Physical attributes
- Education level
- Tattoos, body art/jewelry
- Various religions/atheists
- Gun owners
- Accents/English as a second language
- Welfare recipients
- Sexual orientation, gender identity and expression
- Age
- Cultural background
- Cultural clothing, e.g., hijab, yarmulke
- Disabilities

of color may have an increased risk for serious illness due to higher rates of underlying health conditions compared to whites; are more likely to be uninsured and to lack care, testing and treatment services; are more likely to work in the service industries and be at risk for loss of income; are more likely to live in multigenerational families or low-income and public housing that make it difficult to social distance or self-isolate; often work in jobs that are not amenable to teleworking; and may use public transportation that puts them at risk for exposure to the virus. To compound the situation, people of color are more likely to live in areas where they are exposed to higher amounts of pollution — a contributor to underlying health conditions — compared to white populations that disproportionately contribute to that poor air quality.

Systemic racism affects every area of life in the U.S. Simply stated, a legacy of housing disparity with racist lending practices in redlined neighborhoods means that lower taxes are generated, leading to inadequate school funding, which affects the quality of education. Youth from low-income areas who drop out of school have limited employment options and may find themselves in the pipeline to the criminal justice system. With poor outcomes upon release, recidivism is high.

Trying to solve these problems requires changes in major parts of our system. For a closer look at the now illegal practice of redlining, other issues at the core of systemic racism, and what it will take to solve them, we recommend viewing act.tv’s Systemic Racism Explained: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YrHIQIO_bdQ.

It’s important to note that people across this country are not being asked to apologize for the original sin of slavery perpetrated by white ancestors. What is being asked is to recognize and help dismantle the oppressive systems they built that disproportionately impact people of color.

In addition to Black Lives Matter, this moment is also teaching us more about the concept of intersectionality, defined as the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, which create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. An insightful way to recognize your own circumstance is to answer the following question with a yes or no: Has the Supreme Court ever had to decide whether a person with your specific origins and characteristics has the same rights as others?

POWERFUL, PROVOCATIVE TRAINING

We must acknowledge that our industry and the people who work in and visit our resorts are a microcosm of the current American climate. This means that some team members may overtly discuss their biases that can negatively impact fellow employees as well as the guest experience. Managers need to make a conscientious effort to be aware of and suppress any bias they may feel, especially toward someone who is different from them. And, if they witness such bias in others, they should take steps to eliminate it, which may include a group training session to raise awareness of unconscious bias and the impact it can have on people.

Addressing unconscious bias requires a willingness to acknowledge the truth. In workshops I conducted recently on these challenges in our industry, I showed Stanley Nelson’s seven-minute documentary (created for Starbucks in the wake of their infamous discrimination incident of 2018), which effectively conveys the alternate reality that many Black Americans inhabit.

In the video, a young man in his 20s explained, “I have to make sure I give enough space between myself and other commuters on the train to make sure I’m not making someone uncomfortable. I need to make sure my hands are visible, so they don’t think I’m stealing. I make eye contact with security and managers, so they don’t think I’m hiding anything, and I watch my tone to make sure I don’t come off as threatening. Just trying to leave the house some days is hard. These things keep me at home, away from everything.” A young woman added, “It’s not like I can mute my actual, physical blackness, right? So, it’s an arsenal of different masks. And it happens every time I leave my house.” Interspersed with these interviews is footage of citizens being heckled, dragged out of planes and surveilled in stores.

In stark contrast, a white man confided, “I haven’t really thought about my racial identity much. When I leave my house, regardless of where I’m going, I’m just walking out my door. I’m not walking out thinking what kind of hurdle I’m

STEREOTYPES, SOCIAL FILTERS AND HIDDEN BIASES

Factors that may influence our assessment of others include:

- Appearance, height, weight
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- Education level
- Tattoos, body art/jewelry
- Various religions/atheists
- Gun owners
- Accents/English as a second language
- Welfare recipients
- Sexual orientation, gender identity and expression
- Age
- Cultural background
- Cultural clothing, e.g., hijab, yarmulke
- Disabilities
How can we mitigate unconscious bias and become more inclusive for both guests and team members? Here are some suggestions for ways to address this issue:

1. Encourage senior leaders to take a stand and model inclusive behaviors.
2. Analyze which unconscious biases are most likely to affect your organization, and develop anti-bias training on these specific resort issues.
3. Make it a part of your area’s culture to openly discuss unconscious bias, and clarify your commitment to eliminating it wherever possible (as the saying goes, “Sunlight is the best disinfectant”).
4. Link the expectation of inclusion to your mission statement and EEO policy, and discuss expectations and your zero-tolerance policy for discrimination or rudeness of any kind in your new and rehire orientations.
5. Conduct outreach recruitment for team members and outreach marketing for guests.
6. Eliminate hiring and advancement practices that perpetuate institutional bias, such as settling on a pool of applicants of only one gender and conducting those interviews with only one gender present.
7. Audit pathways to upward mobility. If a manager gives 10 performance reviews — five to men and five to women — and the five top-rated performers are women, that’s a clear indication that there might be a pro-female bias in play. It might be total coincidence, but it’s still a clear call for an evaluation of the process. If the data reveals bias, someone should intervene.
8. Post all job openings and spread the net wide, encouraging all genders to apply.
9. Set diversity goals. Be creative. Look in the most obvious places, in local organizations, and to your current staff. Invest in those with diverse backgrounds and give them a seat and voice at the table.
10. Consider the “blind interview” process when screening candidates, not looking at anyone’s name and instead considering on merit alone.

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Most ski area employees probably assume that everyone feels as carefree as the white man, but they don’t. Guest-facing employees and marketing teams should be reminded to think about what it would be like to visit the ski area or look at the website from the perspective of the 20-year-old Black man in the Starbucks training film.

I was both encouraged and disturbed by stories shared and the unpredictable reactions of supervisors and managers in my workshops. After showing the film, many participants expressed disgust, anger and sadness about the plight of their fellow humans. Others were suspicious that the media has exaggerated racial issues, and that these issues aren’t happening with the frequency depicted in the film, or that people of color are not giving white Americans a chance. In the face of all evidence to the contrary regarding hate in America, some people were clearly conflicted.

Through “motivated reasoning,” people convince themselves or remain convinced of what they want to believe. Similar to confirmation bias, motivated reasoners seek out agreeable information and learn it more easily, while they avoid, ignore, devalue, forget or argue against information that contradicts their beliefs.

I gently fanned the flames so opposing views could be expressed and acknowledged, exposing a variety of stereotypes, social filters, and hidden biases in our workplaces. One senior manager shared that he had happily married a woman he met through the international staffing program. He was confronted by his own direct report, also a manager, who expressed strong opinions about giving work to “foreigners” and his contentious views on immigration. Another senior manager shared that as the parent of a transgender child, he’d had to address ignorance about sexuality both inside and outside of work. Frustrations were expressed about having to adapt to unfamiliar religious traditions practiced by guests of certain sects, both on mountain and in food venues. On a positive note, male managers listened attentively to women who shared frustrations with sexism and their struggles to break through the pink ceiling. Not one male manager attempted to take the position that males have become victims of women who reveal stories of assault.

When white participants were asked if they felt their skin color or accents impacted their coworkers’ perception of their intelligence or competence, or if they had ever altered their communication style (dialed it up or down) to avoid playing into stereotypes, most could not relate. The big “aha!” moment came with the realization that they are not impacted by prejudice every single day and never have to think about it.

One participant, a snowsports school manager, shared a story about how his own gender and age bias had been a going to run into today or how I’ll be judged. I walk out a free man. I just do my thing.”5

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factor during interviews he was conducting for children’s instructors. Initially, he had automatically pictured a teenage female for these roles, but decided to set aside his unconscious bias and take a chance on an enthusiastic teenaged male and a 70-year-old experienced male instructor. As it turned out, kids and parents adored them both, and they became superstars at the school.

Another watershed moment arrived when the singular non-white manager in the room shared obstacles he had faced on his ascent to management. Originally from South America, he was shocked by his first encounter ever with racism, which occurred in the U.S. He validated many similar experiences from the Starbucks training film and confided that he’d felt invisible at times, trying to find a sense of belonging as he realized that there was no senior role model in the organization with a similar racial identity to his own.

What kinds of issues and related biases would you hear at your resort if you were to conduct a similar session?

NEW VIRTUAL AWAKEN UNCONSCIOUS BIAS, DIVERSITY & INCLUSION TRAINING
To build empathy and promote inclusion, I have developed a virtual Awaken Unconscious Bias training specifically for the ski industry. Many leaders feel an urgent need to respond with their commitment to diversity and inclusion, but they’re not sure what to do, and it feels wrong to ignore recent events and remain silent.

“Our team experienced this extraordinary learning dash together. We found that the process and experience are well worth the time and energy we put in. We have follow-up intervals scheduled to ensure our action plans are executed, which the membership will be hearing more about in the next several months. We highly recommend for resort leaders, managers and team members.”
—Kelly Pawlak, NSAA president and CEO

This virtual learning dashboard includes four 45-minute sessions of self-directed work with videos, surveys, reflection questions and application exercises culminating with a 90-minute virtual live training session. I suggest having the senior team experience the training first to make decisions and outline a tangible and practical action plan. From there, managers should experience similar content, with added skill development that teaches them how to talk to team members about biases and diversity, how to practice allyship and intervene when necessary. Ultimately, team members can be trained on everyday actions to create a more welcoming place for coworkers and guests. To see a demo of the program, contact the author at Laura@tahoetrainingpartners.com or visit fulcrumnetwork.com/awakenunconsciousbias4orgs.

ASPIRE TO INSPIRE
The late, great chef and TV personality Anthony Bourdain was one of the most prominent voices connecting the worlds of food and politics. In his travel shows — “Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations” (2005–12), “The Layover” (2011–13), and “Parts Unknown” (2014–18) — he tried to teach Americans not to be scared of other people. He was never afraid to challenge his own ignorance and wanted to make the world a more inclusive place. He advocated travel as a roadmap to deeper empathy and understanding. Bourdain sat down at the table with families from different cultures across the world and showed that all humans are pretty much the same. We all want and need love, a sense of belonging, and have a shared hope for a better world.

Our guests and team members want the same thing. Your inspirational message as a leader should assert that your resort will not make distinctions regarding any person’s relative value as a human being, no matter their origin. A worthy goal for our industry would be to breathe life into these efforts to welcome all guests and team members, regardless of their differences. NSAA joins with countless other voices in the outdoor industry and across America in saying we can do better. We will not shy away from difficult conversations. It is our responsibility not only to listen, but to use our privilege to inspire action. Visit nsaa.org > Resources > Diversity, Equity, Inclusion for educational resources.

Laura Moriarty is a nationally known speaker, corporate trainer and frequent contributor to the Journal. She has led workshops on the importance of overcoming unconscious bias at several NSAA events.

REFERENCES