ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

How (Un)ethical Are You?

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Executive Summary

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Answer true or false: "I am an ethical manager." If you answered "true," here's an uncomfortable fact: You're probably wrong.

Most of us believe we can objectively size up a job candidate or a venture deal and reach a fair and rational conclusion that's in our, and our organization's, best interests. But more than two decades of psychological research indicates that most of us harbor unconscious biases that are often at odds with our consciously held beliefs. The flawed judgments arising from these biases are ethically problematic and undermine managers' fundamental work—to recruit and retain superior talent, boost individual and team performance, and collaborate effectively with partners.

This article explores four related sources of unintentional unethical decision making. If you're surprised that a female colleague has poor people skills, you are displaying *implicit bias*—judging according to unconscious stereotypes rather than merit. Companies that give bonuses to employees who recommend their friends for open positions are encouraging *in-group bias*—favoring people in their own circles. If you think you're better than the average worker in your company (and who doesn't?), you may be displaying the common tendency to *overclaim credit*. And although many *conflicts of interest* are overt, many more are subtle. Who knows, for instance, whether the promise of quick and certain payment figures into an attorney's recommendation to settle a winnable case rather than go to trial?

How can you counter these biases if they're unconscious? Traditional ethics training is not enough. But by gathering better data, ridding the work environment of stereotypical cues, and broadening your mind-set when you make decisions, you can go a long way toward bringing your unconscious biases to light and submitting them to your conscious will.

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