Steps to Change Podcast: Episode 3

Host: Welcome to this episode of Steps to Change, the podcast where we explore learning and development topics, organisational behaviour change and practical ways to inspire people to act differently through the lens of our Steps to Change model - See it, Own it, Change it and Live it. On this episode we're uncovering our bias when it comes to unconscious bias, as we explore how unconscious bias has evolved over the past several years in the Learning and Development space, how people's attitudes towards it have changed. And think about the question what's next for unconscious bias?

I'm your host as always, Allen Liedkie, and I'm joined this episode by Elisa Criado. Welcome Elisa, how are you?

Interviewee: Hi Allen, I'm good, thanks. I love that intro about uncovering our bias about unconscious bias.. It's a little bit hot where I am and sticky coz I'm based in the Netherlands, so we get that kind of damp heat.

Host: And so Elisa for the listeners of the podcast who haven't come in contact with you before, tell us a little bit about yourself, your background and what you do at Steps.

Interviewee: Yeah, so my background is in psychology. Originally, I did a master's in clinical psychology, and worked for a short period of time as a psychologist, therapist. And then I retrained to become an actor and pursued that for a while in the UK, before then joining Steps and combining those two passions, I suppose in a way, and now client relationship director at Steps. I've been here about six years, I started as a project and design manager. Then I got promoted just last month, so I'm in a kind of exciting new place, at Steps.

Host: Congratulations, Elisa, and I've really appreciated your psychology backgrounds in terms of helping me develop as a designer at Steps in the work that we do. Coz you've really been able to look at the psychology of behaviour and I think that's absolutely influenced by our unconscious bias, which is why I'm really excited to have you on this episode to kind of dive deep into it. So, you know, with that, Elisa at least for the listeners out there who maybe haven't come across unconscious bias before, maybe need a little reminder. What is it? What is unconscious bias? Where do they come from? Help us with a little bit of understanding.

Interviewee: Yeah. So as far as I understand it, the term unconscious bias was first used in legal academic work on discrimination. I'm not very familiar with that. Obviously. I'm more familiar with the psychological use fit, which was later than that in the mid-90s that implicit bias was developed and this was really developed as a label for the spontaneous mental associations that are triggered by demographic characteristics such as race, gender, age. And which can influence our judgement and our behaviour, and really the need for this label came about to give a name to the astonishing effects that were found by the Implicit Association test (IAT) that was developed by Tony Greenwald and Mahzarin Banaji. Have you taken one before, Alan?

Host: I have. And yeah, I was really surprised. Not only the process of it, but also the results of it, right? And how it kind of, for those who haven't, I would encourage anybody, any of our listeners, to go and take it as a fascinating process. But you know, flashes, lots of images up at you and you have to respond kinda in the moment to them. And so it was really, really fascinating process.

Interviewee: Yeah, it is an experience, so I agree with you. I would definitely recommend people who haven't taken it yet to take it. And what happens is just to briefly describe it for those who haven't experienced it yet, is that you are challenged with the sorting game you use the E and the I keys on your keyboard, so one with your left hand one with your right.

For example, if you're taking erase IAT, you may be asked to press the E key if you see a black face, the I key if you see a white face and you then practise the sorting task with items that are clearly either in the category good or in the category bad, so they have an emotional charge to them again using your same E and I keys. Then the next step is being asked to sort both sets of items at the same time. This is where it gets quite tricky and becomes more effortful. So for example, if you see a black face or a bad item you need to use the E key and if you see a white face or a good item then we need to use the up key. And then of course they still don't let us off the hook. So, the next level is that the combinations get flipped. So, for example, black faces and good items get same key and white and bad get the same key. So it sounds really simple, but I really break a sweat while I do it. It genuinely is hard work to do

Host: And I think, you know there has been some differences of opinions about the IAT test in how kind of accurate or useful it is when people start to explore the concept of unconscious bias, and I think that's been actually probably fed up into this discussion today in the sense that is, the concept of unconscious bias has become more mainstream. There has been this real kinda pendulum swing of it's going to be the thing that informs all of our behaviours, and we now have cracked the code of how the brain works to actually going the other way of people going. Huh? I don't know. Maybe just like, we shouldn't talk about it.

Interviewee: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Because what happens is that then the there's a calculation made behind the scenes of the test and it rolls out a response. So it will say something like your responses suggest a slight automatic preference for white over black faces, and that is quite a jarring experience if that doesn't match your conscious attitudes about something, so maybe we'll see a little bit more about how that was received in a bit. But I think it is important to mention that the ability to measure these associations indirectly was revolutionary, because up until the IAT, Social psychologists had just asked people, how do you feel about such and such a group or what are the traits that you associate with this particular demographic? And now we're not at all surprised to hear that people you know score very, very differently on this kind of explicit measure versus their IAT scores. But at that time when the IAT first came out people were really surprised at this striking difference and also when they you know, you mentioned this I think for yourself as well, but you feel a huge surprise when you're given that result.

Host: Yeah definitely. And you know I think what this was really interesting about what you just shared that I hadn't been aware of in that process was this almost being one of the first

place to kind of capture an emotional response to something. Maybe a really subtle, deep down, unconscious emotional response to a question in a rapid fire way. So it's kind of this idea that we're just kind of allowing the brain to quickly make the decision for us versus the previous ways that you were talking about where the questions were maybe more considered and so people could filter it through, you know, maybe what was it probably better answer or what have you? I haven't experienced the other way, but it feels like this is almost like one of the original ways for people to see it. You know, if we think about the Steps to change model and See it, Own it, Change it, Live it. This is a really good example of people able to see in one exercise here of how they might respond to these tests, if you will.

Interviewee: Yes, the people thought of it like this window into the soul. But you said you've not experienced it, but you probably will have, because if you take the test, what they always do is measure your implicit associations score and also ask you explicitly how do you feel about these groups? And those two are sort of pitted against each other, and the case for and this is coming back to the definition of unconscious bias.

The case for saying that it is unconscious, which is a very important point that where we are right now in the in the discussion about this is the fact that those explicit scores. So when you take IAT you say, you know I like black people and white people equally doesn't connect directly to the score on your IAT so what is then considered to be your unconscious attitude, together with the fact that people feel surprised?

So those two things the fact that the explicit measure doesn't match the implicit measure, and the fact that people feel surprised, they were taken to mean that what the IAT measures must be unconscious attitudes or biases that reside outside of our awareness and that, you know, you were mentioning already the challenges that have been levelled against IAT. It's very much wrappable.

What does this actually measure? Are we just measuring, you know, what's going on our culture does this, what is this can we sayit's an attitude, to what extent does it influence our behaviour? It does, by the way, is correlated. If you have a high score on IAT, high preference in IAT, you are more likely to exhibit bias behaviour, but it's not obviously the only thing that will decide whether you behave in a certain way et cetera. Yes, there's a lot of criticisms and let's definitely unpick a little bit more of that, but the relevance of the discovery was huge because up until this point on explicit measures people were saying, we like all these demographic groups equally and yet you look at the real world and you see these huge disparities in outcomes for people in these different groups. So the thinking was when they found this, they thought, oh, well, this explains it, right and that is still really the thinking that. Implicit bias or preference, et cetera. That was what was driving inequality.

Host: But what does that mean in terms of now that people know what people do with that and in terms of their understanding of the definition and how that kind of speaks to societal more broadly?

Interviewee: I will. I would say I suppose that part of awareness raising as part of the See it piece that you acknowledge that this is a major driver of our actions and especially when a lot of people share the same bias. There's one thing to say, you know, I've done the test

centre and they weren't my individual biases, but when you realise that a lot of those are shared in your group, the group that has the power.

That's when you then start to think about okay. What do I need to do differently? And there have been two ways of approaching changing stuff. One is to say Okay. Well, I know there's a bias, so let's train change that bias. And another has been to go handle this bias, and you could use the analogy of a blind spot in the car. Which is what the Office of Blind Spot use, who were the founders of the IAT to say Okay. I know that there is a bias or blind spots. I can't change it, but I'm going to outsmart it. So I'm going to think of ways that I can work around it, processes that I can put in place, and innovations that I can use to mitigate the impact of that bias. And I think that I personally prefer the latter. I think that's also what we do at Steps. And one of the reasons I think that I mean unconscious bias, part of the conversation we want to have right is about what happened in that was the evolution of the thinking around unconscious bias and I think one of the reasons that it did fallout of favour. There's something heretical reasons, but one is that the research around whether you can change bias would yield very good results.

So, there were psychologists who were interested in this, but also commercial providers who says we can change biases through training. I've not personally experienced this. I would love to know what that training is actually like, because I don't know, I haven't experienced it, but ultimately it was around. Some of it at least was around exposing people to positive stimuli relating to certain demographic groups and then they would measure their IAT scores before and after. And those IT scores in some cases did change, but the change wasn't lasting so it would only last a couple of days. And that's to me quite a fun. Surprising I suppose, but it did upset a lot of people. It's, I'm just a bit confused as to why this the idea of changing your bias was something that people tried to do as a result of knowing that biases are a problem and I actually share Mahzarin Banaji view on this, which is - But why would you expect the biases to change as a result of what is really a simple one off? In most cases, intervention. So as she puts it this way, and probably paraphrasing a bit here, but. She said something like that. "The mind is a brilliantly adaptive system and it wouldn't make sense for it to change permanently based on a brief instance of, seeing some positive stimuli whilst we still then go back and live in the world that we live in", which is rich, full of stimuli that probably don't align with the stimuli that you saw in your training session. So yeah, in terms of those two different roads in to change that one doesn't seem particularly fruitful.

Host: What stands out for me in that what you just shared there is there's actually been one of the client relationship directors at Steps was sharing a conversation they had with the client where they think that kind of concept that you can actually change biases or get rid of them or shift them of what you just said is. Is being talked about more widely in the in the zeitgeist of this space and they actually challenged them in one of our conversations and claim actually unconscious bias is kind of pointless to talk about cause you can't change anything so why are we even going there if it's a fruitless activity? And so I think you know from that and it's a wonderful challenge, right coz if what you were talking about in the space that we can actually change these biases, I think the conversation starts to shift to, how do we help people identify them and recognise that even though we have them from

an organisational perspective, some of those biases aren't helpful. And we need to be able to create an environment where we can reduce those unhelpful biases to create a more inclusive culture, inclusive society or whatever it may be.

Interviewee: Yeah, I know what you're talking about and there are two things, because I think that particular instance of the client that you're mentioning, I think they even said unconscious bias doesn't exist. So therefore, let's not talk about it. And to me that's a little bit symptomatic of this idea that we can shape facts if they don't, if we don't like them. And this is me, sort of, with my psychologist hat on. The job of psychologists and scientists is to work out what the truth is, not to work out what is comfortable or necessarily pleasant for us to hear. And I think that there was this bit of, oh, well, you know, unconscious bias. It doesn't do what we wanted it to do. It cannot be malleable in the way that we hoped it would be. So therefore, let's chuck the concept in the bin and you can't deny the facts that there is this thing that happens, how exactly you define it.

But there's this thing that happens outside of our most of the time, outside our conscious aware. This, and it genuinely is different to how people consciously perceive their own attitudes. And it's genuinely also linked with brain activity and its links. To the Haggerston and outcomes. So that to me is just interesting as a thing that you go is one thing to say. I don't find this helpful or productive to be talking about another thing to take that step further and so this thing doesn't exist. And also, I think one thing we need to be wary of with this type of work is to make sure that we do not make it too. This is my opinion, right? I don't think necessarily everybody shares that, but that we need to be careful not to make it political or moralistic really when we're doing this type of work, because that empirical evidence suggests that does backfire, and also people really just want to be able to make their own choices about what is right and what is wrong. I think that. You know, that's something that probably we have slightly fall into the trap of. I don't think we've done any of the sort of the bad stuff that some of these unconscious bias training programmes have done that have made them unsuccessful and made the term become unpopular.

But I think this one, maybe we have to agree because. Now even the bigger organisations like the CIPD in the UK have been saying this is the business case for D&I. However, you should be doing this because it is the right thing to do. And we've been reiterating that in our sessions. That this is the right thing to do, but actually it's not our place to tell people what the right thing to do is, is my personal opinion. There was this an important article that came out in 2016 in the Harvard Business Review called why Diversity Programmes fail. It was by the researchers Frank Dobbin and Alexander Cornville. And is based on a lot of research they had conducted in the real world, albeit only in the US, but it was looking at companies' diversity initiatives and the outcomes in terms of diversity statistics. And results were really pretty bleak when it came to the three most popular issues at the time, which were mandatory diversity training. Job tests, which is hiring tests and performance ratings and grievance systems. And the unconscious bias bit really only comes into the first one. And a lot of that training was that training we were talking about earlier around administering IATs, either just doing that or trying to change the IAT outcome in some way. But actually, in the same article there was some really positive messages for other types of interventions such as voluntary training. But I think that headline know why diversity

programmes fail and also, that had shock value, I think quite rightly, also the fact that some of the mandatory training. Seemed to actually adversely affect the statistics and that's when that backfiring language came into the place into play. And that had I think a cautionary effect in our field.

Host: OK, so Elisa, thinking about everything that we've talked about so far in the episode and then kind of funnelling this into our approach, at Steps, you know. How do we use our knowledge in the evolutionary concept of unconscious bias that we've been exploring it to really create content that's going to be helpful for people to grow on this journey that they are on.

Interviewee: Well, I think there's a couple of ways where Steps is pretty different to probably the majority of that unconscious bias training that we were talking about earlier, I think one important thing that we do is create a space and an opportunity for people to really digest what they're seeing. So, we don't tell people what it is that they're seeing, but they make the labels themselves as it was. So basically, that that's probably biased behaviour, and that's important for a few reasons, because it gives them the ownership of it as well, but it also allows you to have that, the lovely affective cognitive dissonance. Because if somebody has voluntarily come into a session is voluntarily making their own conclusions. Therefore, their thinking, well, I'm doing this and I'm actively engaging with this, therefore I am a diversity champion and that's very different if you have a mandatory diversity programme. And I think another aspect, is that we use humour, and one of the things that came out of the research on programmes that don't work is if they are perceived to be unpleasant. And I think we work quite hard to make it also an entertaining experience, not for the sake of it, but because that is conducive to learning to processing new thoughts.

Host: You've articulated that very well because I think, you know if you can't hide from behaviours that are being played out right coz we do our research, we do our due diligence and we don't make stuff up into programmes that we do. And if what we're hearing from participants that we hold the conversations we have during the research process, if they're saying these are the behaviours that are showing up in your playing that out. You can't suddenly then go, oh, well, that's not true. Well, because it is. So maybe that's a really powerful shift from the IAT approach, where it's all very kind of binary, if you will, but allowing the use of the drama and then having the conversations around the drama, we can start to go. But maybe that's not what I meant with those behaviours, and I didn't really. Think that was a bias driven one and so just kind of having those lovely ah ha moments through the humour, through the fact that we're all just human beings trying to do our best in the world, you can start to maybe see that it's not so, not such a scary subject to the explorer.

Interviewee: No, also we don't call it training and I think that's important. So, we're not saying we hold the answers to this, but say this is a topic that clearly needs your attention as smart, important, influential people in your organisation.

So, let's spend some time on it together rather than telling people what it is that they should be doing, the reasons why they should be doing it, et cetera.

Host: So I guess Elisa, as we sort of wrap up this conversation, big question here. What's the kind of future of unconscious bias in your viewpoint for the learning and development world?

Interviewee: One of these you can talk about yet is more theoretical challenges that have been held against unconscious bias as a concept, I suppose, and for me the future is linked to that. So we talked a little bit about the fact that it fell out of favour because research showed that a lot of interventions didn't actually work, or they backfired, et cetera. And then there's this other part of the criticism which is around can we truly call this unconscious? People say, can't possibly be outside of our conscious awareness and we know from having delivered loads of these programmes, that the use of the term unconscious bias has a certain effect in people is a very pragmatic consideration, right? But what do they hear when they hear the term unconscious bias? And what researchers at Bath now are kind of making a point about is that what they're hearing is that unconscious means it's something that is inaccessible to them, something which they therefore also then cannot be responsible for.

That something I recognise, I suppose, from participants giving that back to me, and it becomes a kind of get out of jail free card. And that's obviously really problematic into your point about ownership when we're trying to help people to own it. If you're saying to them well it’s completely outside of your conscious awareness and the only way that you can know about this about yourself is by taking a test that churns out a result, then that's far from empowering, I think.

So to answer your question about the future this is really interesting research that these people at the University of Bath are doing, which is tackling this question. Is it really outside of our, does it have to be outside of our conscious awareness? So they've asked people to predict their scores on the IAT by showing the stimulus set, so for example. They would show a bunch of black faces in contrast to a bunch of white faces, and then they would say, where on the scale do you think your preference is going to lie? And that's a very different question to ask than their previous explicit measures that the IAT is normally compared against. We've talked about that before. You know, how do you feel about such and such a group because a lot more comes into answering that question, as she said. So, it turns out, if you asked that very simple question, how do you think your score is going to come out if this is the task we're going to set you and you give them the stimulus so they can feel what it feels like in themselves.

When they see those images, it turns out that they can predict them, and that's because their attention is directed to the spontaneous mental reaction they're having. And the weird thing is, apparently our attention is very much not directed at that most of the time, which is why it is that you can still say that it's true, but this is normally outside our awareness. But it's not because it's inaccessible to us is because we're not paying attention to it. And

they've got a very, very clever, very complicated research design where they proved this and they say the more accurate term rather than unconscious would be preconscious. And I wonder whether that helps us in a way into the future of unconscious bias that helps people to feel like. This is something that I can know about myself, is something that I can experience about myself and it really helps with that. See it and Own it piece a lot more. Does that make sense.

Host: Yeah, that's fascinating. I love that idea of the preconscious coz I think what stands out for me and then building on this sort of Change It, Live It process is that things that have been really not only helpful for me, but things that have come out of sessions that we lead with participants in this space.

Because the big the $1,000,000 question is like, so now that I'm aware of it, what can I do to help reduce it? What are the everyday things that are going to help me identify and reduce it or what have you? And a couple of things that I go back to. And I think this speaks to that preconscious concept that you just shared. Is if you're, you know, we were super busy when we're making decisions really quickly. You know we've all got you know how many distractions and things on our plate that we're dealing with. But we also might sit on decisions that have really big impact and not only about you know the people we work with, other business as a whole or what have you, but if you can one slow down, your thinking a little bit. And to slow that thinking down, just pause and ask yourself, am I being objective? Where am I being fair? And that can interrupt a heuristic where that kind of connexion in the brain makes when trying to make rapid, quick decisions, and we know within unconscious bias in those rapid decision making is where conscious bias can chill out.

Not always will it, but if you allow those kinds of breaks in your fast thinking or your knee jerk responses that you might make to a question that somebody asked you, just pause for me to hold on. Am I being objective? Am I being fair or something to that effect? Then you can interrupt that potential unconscious bias driven or preconscious decision that you just shared there to really help people shift it. But then also I think ask people, right? I think you can only get a real sense of who you are when you're very open to hearing feedback from other people. So, check in with your teams, like what kind of decisions am I making? Are they the same? Do they repetitive behaviours get that good 360 feedback to? To help us along the way, because it's going to, it's never going to go away unconscious bias or implicit bias, but if we are aware of it, we can start to kind of then take steps to reduce it if it's not helpful.

Interviewee: Definitely, and you're absolutely right the way you describe, you know slowing down your thinking because the way initially when the IAT came out, the way that it was conceptualised, this is a completely different system of thinking, right. This is their unconscious one and this is the conscious, while in the unconscious one affects unconscious behaviours like how close I sit to someone, and the other one feeds more conscious decisions that we make. But now it's much more the preconscious fits within that. It's much more this idea that the fast processing, let's say, or system One, if you want to say, would feed in suggestions for your system Two. And if you're not slowing down, if you're not

checking it or directing your attention to it, then the system tool will just adopt whatever the system wants suggests. But if you do slow down, if you focus your attention on it, then you have the opportunity or just making a different decision on what truly your opinion is in that moment.

Host: Oh, Elisa, I wish we had a lot more time for this. This has been just such a wonderful discussion. Thank you very much for taking the time to join us today, and that's about all we have left for this episode. If you'd like to know more about Steps and Steps to Change, make sure you visit our website, find us on LinkedIn, or sign up to our newsletter. All the links will be available on our show notes. If you're interested in how Steps could partner with you or your organisation to support your needs, you can send us an e-mail.

Fill out the form online at www.stepsdrama.com and we'll get back to you. Is there a subject area you'd like to hear more about? You'd like to hear us have a discussion on? If so, reach out to us by e-mail or social media. Let us know when we might find a way to work that to a future episode. As always, thank you to our production team. We could not do without you and I have been your host Alan Liedkie and we look forward to you tuning into the next episode. Well, we're going to be exploring what approaches can we take to supporting good effective anti- harassment training. Until next time, thank you and remember you too can See it, Own it, Change it and Live it.