

Case 3: Unconscious Bias

Alex is an Asian Canadian employee at a small accounting firm named Huxley & Associates LLP. She's been working at Huxley for two years as a senior accountant. Before that, she was a junior accountant for four years. In the office, she's known for going above and beyond; she's involved in difficult projects, and her managers have always come to her first with complex issues. Alex works on a large team with ten other accountants, which is led by Jenna, their manager.

During a staff meeting with all of the managers, a new project is announced. The project has tight deadlines that will require long hours. Jenna is told that her team will lead the project. The other managers ask Jenna if she needs additional resources to meet the deadlines, but Jenna is confident that her team can get the job done. She's proud that her team was selected and feels this reflects positively on herself and her leadership skills.

Jenna pulls her team into a meeting and tells them the news, outlining the project and explaining the timelines. She acknowledges that this project will have a big workload and that everyone needs to make it a top priority over the coming weeks. The team is asking a lot of questions and Jenna can tell that everyone is already feeling a little overwhelmed. Some wonder if the deadline is too tight, while others fear that given their current workload, they won't be able to fully prioritize this project. Jenna assures everyone that they can handle this and offers her support. "We're all going to have to work extra hard," she says. "Let's all take the lead from Alex and work as hard as she does. I'll need people coming in early, staying late, and bringing work home with them as needed—just like Alex!"

Jenna looks over to Alex and smiles. But instead of being happy with the praise, Alex looks uncomfortable. Jenna shrugs, assuming Alex doesn't like public praise. Jenna adjourns the meeting, knowing her team is anxious about the deadlines, but she's confident that the project will get done on time if everyone works as hard as Alex.

Over the next few weeks, when Jenna arrives to work, Alex is there. When Jenna leaves for the day, Alex is still there. Jenna is proud that her employee is so dedicated to the project. During a check-in meeting, Jenna asks the team how they're progressing with the work. When the team tells her that they are feeling overwhelmed, Jenna tells them that she notices Alex is at the office before and after office hours. "And she's not burnt out," Jenna tells them. "Everyone needs to work as hard Alex." After Jenna closes the meeting, she remembers how the senior management team told her that if she needed additional resources, all she had to do was ask.

During lunch, Jenna sees Alex sitting and chatting with another employee named Michelle. Jenna often sees Alex and Michelle together. They seem to get along well. Michelle, who is also of Asian descent, is a junior accountant who has been with the firm for two years. Jenna approaches Michelle's manager and asks if she can use Michelle as an additional resource for her project. Michelle's manager agrees, and Jenna brings Michelle to a staff meeting to introduce her to the team.

"I can see that you're all feeling overwhelmed," Jenna tells her team, "So I brought in Michelle to give us a hand." Everyone greets Michelle with enthusiasm. But when Jenna looks over at Alex, Alex is not as excited as the others.

After the meeting, Alex knocks on Jenna's door and asks if she can speak with her. Jenna welcomes her in and is looking forward to getting a better understanding of how she's feeling about the project. "Why did you bring on Michelle?" asks Alex, surprising Jenna. Jenna tells Alex that she often saw her with Michelle and thought that if she brought on someone who is similar to her, they would work well together, and this would boost team morale and productivity. "Have you ever worked with Michelle?" Alex asks Jenna, and Jenna shakes her head no. Alex then tells her that while she does like Michelle, the reason they get along so well is because they don't work closely together.

Alex confides to Jenna that Michelle doesn't like to take initiative. While Michelle is kind, she needs a lot of coaching and guidance to complete small tasks. Alex worries it will be more work to have Michelle on the team than to not have her. "I'm sorry I didn't look into Michelle's working style before bringing her on," Jenna says. "I'll transfer Michelle back to her old team for the time being. Thank you for being so honest with me. I just hoped to find someone who works as hard as you." Again, Alex looks uncomfortable with this comment.

"Why do you expect me to work so much harder than the others?" Alex asks Jenna. Jenna is taken aback by this question. "It's not that I expect it," she says. "I just notice that you work harder."

"It's just that I'm never *asked* if I can stay late. I'm *told*. Sometimes I think you have different—higher—expectations than the rest of the team. One day, I came to work on time, and you asked me why I was late!" The fact that she is the only person of colour on the team (and, in particular, the only person of Asian descent) makes Alex feel isolated.

"I don't think you're being malicious or acting with malintent," Alex continues. "I just hope that you can be more aware of your words. I love my job," Alex says, "and I think you're a great manager. I just hope this doesn't change the way you feel about me."

Questions:

- (1) Was Jenna intentional with her actions toward Alex and Michelle? Do you think Jenna was trying to single out Alex's work ethic because of her Asian Canadian ethnicity?
- (2) How might Jenna's attitudes towards Alex be harmful to other employees at the firm who identify as Asian or Asian Canadian?
- (3) Is there a way for Jenna to correct her actions that stem from her biases? If so, how? What could she do to be more conscious as she moves forward?
- (4) What are Jenna's strengths as a manager? Her weaknesses? Do her biases interfere with her ability to be a stronger manager for Alex?

(5) What are some strategies Jenna could practice to prevent herself from stereotyping Alex, Michelle, and other employees in the future?

Additional Resources for Case 3:

- 11 Harmful Types of Unconscious Bias and How to Interrupt Them (blog post by Catalyst), [here](#)
- How To Tackle Unconscious Bias In Your Workplace (article by Forbes), [here](#)
- Are You Aware of Your Biases? (Article by Harvard Business Review), [here](#)
- Author Talks: How to interrupt bias in the workplace (article by McKinsey & Co.), [here](#)
- Unconscious bias derails diversity and inclusion efforts. Here's how to manage it (article by The Globe and Mail), [here](#)
- Erasing Institutional Bias: How to Create Systemic Change for Organizational Inclusion (book by Ashley Diaz Mejias & Tiffany Jana), [here](#)
- Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People (book by Anthony Greenwald and Mahzarin Banaji), [here](#)

Source: DEI Case Collection for Professional Accountants, University of Toronto Professional Accounting Centre, 2023, PAC website <https://www.utm.utoronto.ca/pac/case-collections/dei-case-collection-professional-accountants>.