

## **Abstract for conference: Crisis and Incident Management Topic**

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### **Are we biased against our best leaders?**

Our unconscious bias affects our judgement. How we view others, how we judge others, the decisions we take, how we prioritise and what actions we take. Unconscious biases are the automatic, mental shortcuts used to process information and make decisions quickly. These shortcuts can be useful when making decisions with limited information, focus, or time, but can sometimes lead us to overlook great ideas or undermine individual's potential due to our own internal judgements or stereotypes.

Unconscious bias can have great implications on crisis management for both leaders and the team members participating in crisis situations. In contrast with routine emergencies, crises involve substantial novelty – characteristics of emergency that have not been previously encountered by the organisation or people involved.<sup>1</sup> As such, it has potential to influence behaviour of leaders and team members – push them to their limits and expose them to an unprecedented, highly stressful situations. This is when we are most likely to act on our biases rather than rely on our rational judgement. If, in such situations, leaders form their teams based on bias, improvisation and innovation will be most likely stifled by lack of diversity and compliance.

Leaders are typically chosen for their knowledge, effectiveness during the prior events, and demonstrated capacity to function under pressure.<sup>2</sup> Our willingness to follow a crisis leader will depend on if we judge them 'worthy'. If our perception of 'worthiness' is not based on known performance but our biased assumptions of who should be leading, we may be biased towards people of certain age, gender or racial group and we may question their ability to be an effective leader and simply don't trust them to represent our interests. Equally, the leader can overlook team members who are different based on external factors such as age, race, gender or disability. In an oil and gas industry where the employees are mostly male, they will see these characteristics visualised in an older, professional-looking, male figure. As a result, females, different racial or ethnic backgrounds and young people will have less opportunities to be equally included in the career pathway leading them to fill the ultimate leader spot.

Good leaders are not only remembered by their actions or what they said in the particular moment, but mostly by how they made their team members and other people feel. If we were to compare female and male style of leadership, many people would tend to describe women as more caring and communicative, team building, multitasking style, whereas men would be described as having more commanding, controlling and competitive style focused on single task. However, in an equal world we should walk away from leadership style based on gender as it is putting it in the stereotypical frames where women who are hard, demanding and competitive or men who are nurturing and team-orientated will be seen as a deviation. Diversity in leadership means more than simply having more female leaders. It should extend beyond gender frames and biases and focus on merit.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. A.M. Howitt, Dr. H.B. Leonard, D.W. Giles, Leadership in Routine Emergencies and Crises. The *Deepwater Horizon* Incident. The Coast Guard Journal of Safety & Security at Sea. Proceedings of the Marine Safety & Security Council. May-December 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. A.M. Howitt, Dr. H.B. Leonard, D.W. Giles, Leadership in Routine Emergencies and Crises. The *Deepwater Horizon* Incident. The Coast Guard Journal of Safety & Security at Sea. Proceedings of the Marine Safety & Security Council. May-December 2017.

Google has coined the term unbiassing, which is a tool to help mitigate unconscious bias and turn it into an objective and conscious decision making. Building work environments that embrace and encourage the differences among our people is a known performance booster and as such should be highly recommended. By understanding unconscious bias and overcoming it at critical moments, both leaders and team members can make better decisions and build environment in crisis that supports and encourages diverse perspectives and contributions.