

# Understanding unconscious bias



WORDS BY MERYN MORRISON, WIRT CHAIRPERSON

**T**he recently held Road Transport Forum Conference was another great forum to promote the work of the Women in Road Transport network and discuss some of the objectives of our organisation.

A working lunch was held to maximise the opportunity for our members and others interested to engage with the WIRT Governance Group, find out what has been going on, and discuss some of the issues women are facing in our industry.

As well as discussing how we encourage greater employment of women, promote their accomplishments, and create more diversity, the 45 attendees addressed the issue of unconscious bias and the impact that has on women in the sector.

Bias is the very human trait of having a prejudice for or against something based on your own background and experiences. While it can manifest itself in positive ways, it is most commonly associated with negative consequences such as racism, religious intolerance, and, of course, sexism.

There are two common types of bias. Conscious bias, also known as explicit bias, and unconscious bias, sometimes called implicit bias. Negative unconscious bias is far more prevalent than negative conscious bias in western liberal societies largely due to the diligence of governments and other influential institutions in legislating and speaking out against prejudice.

Unconscious bias is a lot more difficult to prevent and often exists in direct conflict with a person's conscious values.

Certain scenarios can activate deeply held attitudes and beliefs that lead to unconscious bias. For example, unconscious bias may be more prevalent in private situations such as at the ballot box or when reviewing an employee's standard of work. It can also become apparent when multi-tasking and working under time pressure. It is easy in these circumstances to develop a tunnel vision and not consider all the options, which is a ripe environment for unconscious bias to thrive.

One of the more common biases to exist not only in our industry but also across wider society is that women aren't as good at driving as men. Curiously, it is not just men that believe it either. Many women have become so conditioned to hearing it that they believe it themselves.

For some reason, this attitude still prevails as accepted wisdom despite all the anecdotal evidence and government

statistics that disprove it. In 2016–17, ACC received approximately twice the number of claims from accidents caused by men than accidents caused by women, and the cost to ACC from those claims was nearly four times more in the case of men than it was for women. Unfortunately, it seems that it will take more than simple evidence to stamp this bias out.

Overall, it was great to see so many women representing various parts of the industry at the RTF Conference. I was especially thrilled to be at the NZ Road Transport Industry Awards to see WIRT founding chairwoman Jackie Carroll win the award for outstanding contribution to health and safety. Jackie has been a real industry leader when it comes to managing the new health and safety legislation that has been such a challenge for our industry and her prize is well deserved. The enormous amount of work that Jackie did to help establish WIRT in the early days must also be acknowledged. Without her, we wouldn't be where we are now.

Finally, I'd like to recognise the three women who won through the regional heats and competed in the final of the NZ Truck Driving Championship 2017 – Samantha Fraser of NZ Express Transport, Philippa Van Grondelle of Move Logistics, and Ashleigh-Jade Sutherland of SJ Reid Transport. All performed extremely creditably, and I hope they inspire many other women drivers to consider entering the competition next year. ■

“ It was great to see so many women representing various parts of the industry ”