



# Book Making Diversity Work

## 7 Steps for Defeating Bias in the Workplace

Sondra Thiederman  
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### Recommendation

In the movie *Anchorman*, a parody about a television news team set in the 1970s, the main character played by Will Ferrell explains to his colleagues, “Well, I could be wrong, but I believe diversity is an old, old wooden ship that was used during the Civil War era.” Thankfully, society has come a long way since the ’70s. The modern workplace hosts a collection of employees from different backgrounds, races, nations, religions and sexual orientations. For a company to function, all these people have to work together. Organizational leaders must minimize the tensions between individuals and groups to keep operations running smoothly. Left uncorrected, bias can ruin an organization. Sondra Thiederman, an expert on diversity issues in the workplace, has prepared a manual for managers and employees who want to recognize and correct biased behavior. This book contains personal examples and easy step-by-step individual and group exercises for reducing bias. If you want more, Thiederman offers a reader’s guide to stimulate further discussion of this sensitive issue. *BooksInShort* finds this book practical and unexpectedly entertaining, and highly recommends it to human resources professionals and managers.

### Take-Aways

- Bias is a rigid positive or negative belief about a group of people.
- Bias is an attitude, not a behavior, but behavior shapes attitude.
- Thus, people can fix a biased outlook by acting unbiased, even insincerely.
- To overcome your biases, use the seven-step “visual renewal process.” Start by becoming aware of your biases, gauging their depth and weighing their secondary benefits.
- Then examine your prejudices, redefine your sense of kinship, control your biased thoughts and act as if you have no prejudices.
- People with strong ethnic identities are more open to other cultures.
- When people see that those whom they view as different actually share their interests and concerns, their intolerance fades.
- Positive biases that lead to overly favorable treatment can also be destructive.
- “Gateway Events” – workplace occurrences that provoke sensitive, discrimination-related issues – can present learning opportunities if you follow up with open discussions.
- Fostering prejudice spreads bias; confronting prejudice reduces bias; publicly opposing prejudice can change other people’s biases.

### Summary

#### Biased Attitudes

Leaders generally agree that workplace diversity benefits business, but good feelings on every side are not an automatic achievement. Sometimes diversity needs organizational encouragement. Numerous studies report that many companies prefer doing business with firms that have proactive diversity inclusion programs. Clients have pushed some companies that once lacked diverse workforces to expand their racial and gender hiring practices under the threat of losing business. For example, Shell Oil surveyed its vendors to be sure that they “had solid inclusion programs in place.” In a very visible case, four important advertisers bolted from CBS in 2007 after radio host Don Imus insulted the members of a black women’s basketball team. Bias can also lead to costly lawsuits that repel customers and tarnish reputations.

“Stakeholders and customers want to do business with organizations that care about diversity and manage it effectively.”

Bias is defined as a rigid positive or negative belief about a group of people. Such prejudice is an attitude, not a behavior. Individuals can correct discriminatory thinking, even if it is persistent, when they become aware of its presence and seek to minimize its influence on their lives. Psychologist William Cunningham found that when white people viewed photos of black people for 30 milliseconds, the amygdala region of their brains reacted. This spike in brain activity gave rise to the concept of “instinctive bias,” as an impulse which fuels jumping to conclusions about those who are different. But when Cunningham showed white subjects the photos of black individuals for 525 milliseconds, the extended time frame changed their brains’ responses because the image entered the area of the brain where rational thought occurs and conscious thinking overruled unreasoning bias.

“A few words of warning: Reading this book is apt to make you feel the discomfort of self-discovery.”

Social interaction can reduce bias, since it allows people of different backgrounds to see each other as human beings, not as depersonalized members of a group. Individuals stop categorizing each other as they overcome their biases. Yet people tend to cluster in “kinship groups” of their own race, culture or ethnicity. This comfort-seeking tendency is not biased behavior. On the contrary, those with strong ethnic identities share a “group self-esteem” that empowers them to be more open to other cultures.

“It is not biased to make a reasonable assumption about someone based on available evidence.”

While people often define bias as a negative response to certain groups, it can also manifest as unrealistically positive, blind favoritism. Someone acting on the basis of such a “guerilla bias,” which often lies “concealed behind good intentions,” can bestow preferential treatment on certain groups or individuals. For instance, one manager constantly offered excuses for a single mother who was often late to work. While this could be seen as a kindness, it was a form of bias because the manager was acting out of favoritism for a specific group, in this example, single mothers. Often the perpetrator of such a prejudice can say with sincerity, “I’m not biased. I was just trying to be nice.”

“Bias is a way of coping with a complex, stressful and ever-changing world.”

However, positive biases can be as destructive as negative ones. When a bank opened new branches in a Latino neighborhood, the district manager assigned a top employee of Mexican descent to a new branch. The staffer objected to the reassignment. He said that, although his parents were Mexican, he did not speak Spanish or know much about Mexican culture. This contradicted the manager’s positive expectation that he would be grateful and well suited to work in a Latino neighborhood. The manager rationalized that the worker lacked motivation, and the employee soon left the company.

## Breaking the Pattern

Bias is a conditioned response, so people can change it by raising their awareness, exploring alternative ways of thinking and practicing new behaviors. The “visual renewal process” raises their consciousness of their own biased assumptions so they can replace them with more rational, less emotional conclusions. This process has seven stages:

1. **Become aware of your prejudices** – Everyone has secret beliefs that they reveal only to their closest friends, and some they reveal only to themselves. To discover your biases, examine and evaluate your behavior and thoughts, and reflect on how you regard other people and cultures. Since biases are attitudes, they begin as thoughts that you later convert into actions. Problematically, subconscious thoughts bypass the brain’s reflective, rational process and convert directly into actions. Scrutinizing your automatic reactions is another way to become aware of your prejudices. Say that you attend a presentation by a co-worker from a country you do not respect, and you publicly disapprove of his suggestions. If you might have regarded the proposal more warmly if someone else had offered it, you may have a bias you need to mitigate.
2. **Gauge the weight of your prejudices** – Regarding all professors as “absentminded” might be prejudicial but it isn’t important. Focus your energy on fixing any personal biases that have a negative impact. Look for danger signals in how you hire, manage and retain workers. Can you lead and work with all kinds of people without weighting your actions with preconceptions about their ethnicity or background? Holding biases is normal, but it is important to control the ones that could harm your firm. In the workplace, biases can affect promotion, productivity, team building, sales and customer service. Discriminatory practices put your company at legal risk.
3. **Know when your biases have “secondary gains”** – Intolerance persists because it provides a benefit, or “secondary gain,” in the form of control, attention, excitement or power. It also generates a false belief that a person can predict the future. This happens when you are prejudiced against people and they act in a way that fits your incorrect stereotype. “Bias gain” occurs when members of one group use their prejudices to establish power over members of another group. Intolerance also serves as a buffer against loss and a protection from emotional pain.
4. **Examine your biases** – Look at how you formed your preconceptions. Where did you learn them and what were the circumstances? Based on your personal experiences, how many members of a particular group have you met who actually show the characteristics your prejudice ascribes to them? Have you met people in that group who did not exhibit these traits? People who ask themselves such questions often find that their biases are not rational or experiential. Commonly, parents and the media feed and pass along prejudices. While a negative personal experience can make you feel animosity toward a group of people, such reactions are often emotional and unreliable because they are based on a one-dimensional event. People can learn to be less prejudiced by recalling times when they acted in a biased way or, from the other perspective, when they felt hurt because they were discriminated against. Reflecting on such experiences often provides the opportunity to re-examine the situation and the facts dispassionately.
5. **Redefine groups** – Biases remain strong because people tend to join kinship groups that hold common traits. Some groups can reduce their collective, inherent biases by redefining their membership criteria. Including people from different backgrounds in your group breaks down the “us” versus “them” mentality that fuels

prejudice. People also deflate their predilections when they see that those whom they considered diverse actually share their interests or hobbies. Seeking interactions with people who are dissimilar to you and who do not fit your stereotypes can alter your expectations and, ultimately, correct your prejudices. As people notice what others care about, they feel a “shared empathy” that reduces bias. Acting coach Konstantin Stanislavsky asked his students to use shared empathy to feel their “characters’ life experiences.” Empathy is a more powerful tool for cutting bias than trying to understand someone else’s circumstances rationally.

6. **Control your biases** – Biases are composed of thoughts that you can control. When you have a prejudicial thought against a person, simply eject that ideation from your head, and look at the person as an individual. With practice, this can become automatic.
7. **Act as if you are not biased** – People can change the prejudices they harbor by acting as if they are not biased. Because attitudes follow behavior, acting in an unbiased way, even if you are being insincere and do not actually believe in your own actions, can reshape your outlook. For instance, one manager did not like people who couldn’t speak English correctly and would not initiate workplace conversations with those who misused the language. This created tension among her team and generated accusations of discrimination. To change her prejudice, she began seeking contact with people who had little command of English. Their English may not have improved, but the manager began to recognize that they were valuable team contributors.

## Starting a Dialogue

Dialogue can be the best antidote to discrimination. Having people talk about their differences can present real opportunities to engage in discussions about bias. For example, the U.S. murder trial of O.J. Simpson presented a national forum for the discussion of racial issues, but most people wasted this opportunity because they lacked the courage to confront the conversation. Blacks and whites might have felt that they were taking some risk by talking to each other about the controversial trial, but the conversation would have illuminated their different feelings about the legal system and law enforcement.

“Generally, those who have few biases tend to be fairly indifferent to whether or not a person is different from themselves.”

Bias is especially persistent because people spread it by sharing their prejudices. In this respect, partiality is contagious, and almost Pavlovian, because mentioning a certain ethnic group or religion can trigger a reflexive bias. According to the principles discovered by physiologist Ivan Pavlov, people who hear others make negative ethnic comments and promote stereotypes may become deconditioned; exposure wears away their aversion to bias and they stop reacting to prejudicial language. To stop this negative process, challenge those who express biased attitudes. That is one reason why it is so important to speak out when you hear someone talk in a discriminatory way.

## “Gateway Events”

The need to confront bias often arises at unexpected times and places. Perhaps your team experiences discriminatory treatment or you hear a crude racist joke. That’s actually an opportunity. Such an occurrence, called a “Gateway Event,” creates a learning experience – but the discussions that such events provoke are often very sensitive, so approach them with care. Participants in Gateway Event postmortem discussions must be honest and aware that the process may reveal their own biases. People often fear appearing nervous or judgmental, or they are afraid that the other participants will get angry. The key to leading a significant discussion is to set up a conversation that fulfills a stated purpose but that is not charged with emotion. In such a discussion, too much emotion can become a catalyst for conflict.

“Some biases delude us into thinking that we are, and deserve to be, of higher status than other groups.”

“Diversity dialogues” are so sensitive that you should try to avoid the natural tendency to dodge discussing difficult matters or to jump to conclusions about other people’s behavior. Assess everyone’s intentions. Explore whether the co-workers who held a meeting and didn’t invite some of their colleagues really meant to exclude them because of prejudice toward their race, disability, heritage or gender – or whether they simply called a meeting to consider an initiative that didn’t involve those particular co-workers.

“We must begin carrying on conversations about bias, because conversation is our most powerful weapon against the fear and misunderstanding that surround us.”

Discussions to deal with discrimination must have a goal. Lead all the participants to understand and agree that they face a common enemy – bias – which this discussion can help them control. During the conversation, participants should acknowledge each other’s contributions. When addressing the precipitating event or problem, break it down into small component parts and address each one separately, rather than trying to resolve the entire issue by devising a single grand solution. Don’t dismiss incidents that hurt other people’s sensibilities by saying, “That was only a joke” or “We were just kidding.”

“Bias causes us to react not to individuals but to a motley succession of stereotypes and caricatures.”

Using correct, carefully chosen words and crafting an appropriate oral presentation will increase the odds of making the meeting successful. This includes modulating your voice and speaking softly so people listen harder to what you have to say. To be more effective, understate your argument rather than exaggerating your claims or opinions to make your case. Using absolute statements, such as, “This is the way it has always been done” or “That’s the way it is,” closes the door to further input. Instead, give others the opportunity to speak and to participate in hammering out important issues. Paying attention to what other people say is important, particularly in a discussion about discrimination-related problems.

“One of the scariest things about bias is that it is contagious.”

To redirect the Gateway conversation so it fulfills its most important purpose, use analogies and creative questions. If you are moderating the meeting, allow participants to express their points of view without being interrupted or contradicted. Teach your staff members to listen carefully. Many people incorrectly confuse listening with agreeing or being passive, but that is incorrect. A good listener seeks common ground to gain a better understanding of a problem and to reach a successful – and unbiased – conclusion.

## About the Author

**Sondra Thiederman**, Ph.D., is a leading expert on workplace diversity, cross-cultural businesses and bias reduction. She is the author of four books and a frequent public speaker.

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