

DEVELOPMENT

The Bias Burden

How a bias
can weigh down
your career.

By Sondra Thiederman

Harry has a bias: "All Hispanics are familiar with Hispanic culture, speak Spanish, and regard it as an honor to work with their own." As a result, he transferred Hector—one of his most promising branch managers—to a region where most customers were Mexican immigrants. What Harry failed to realize was that Hector, despite his Hispanic heritage, had little interest in Hispanic culture.

Result: Because of his discomfort with his new work setting, Hector quit to

work for another bank. In the process, Harry gained the reputation of being unable to retain valued employees of diverse backgrounds.

Lucy manages a small group of Native Americans. Unfortunately, several of these otherwise good employees are chronically late to work. Having heard that some Native American cultures have a view of punctuality that is different from her own, Lucy decided to give those individuals a break and allow them to come to work 30

minutes later than their teammates.

Result: The rest of her team deeply resented what they saw as preferential treatment, and productivity, along with Lucy's reputation as a manager, declined.

George would have made a great director of training except for the fact that he was notoriously bad at coaching his direct reports. Apparently, his bias told him that women and members of emerging (previously called "minority") groups were too fragile to take criticism. Besides, as he put it, "I don't like to hurt anyone's feelings."

Result: George performed badly as a manager and was passed over for promotion.

When thinking of how a bias can damage a career, most minds imagine the beleaguered woman, victimized gay person, or member of an emerging group whose career progress has been compromised by a blatant bias directed against her or him. As the previous examples show, however, it's sometimes our own biases, not those directed against us, that slow our professional progress. These internal biases need not be blatant racism or sexism to do their damage. In fact, most often it's the subtler assumptions that color our perceptions of those with whom we work.

I call that subtle kind of bias, *Guerilla Bias*. Like the guerilla warrior who hides within stands of lush foliage, Guerilla Bias is concealed behind good intentions, kind words, and even thoughtful acts. Guerilla Bias is based on a premise that all women, emerging groups, people with disabilities, and those who are outside the so-called "majority" population are to some degree fragile, quick to explode, or in need of special treatment.

Harry, Lucy, and George provide only three examples of how subtle bias can block a promising career path. Other ways in which a bias can interfere with effective functioning and potential advancement are

- the inability to conduct fair and accurate interviews or assessments
- the inability to interpret correctly the reactions and needs of participants in training programs
- the inability to form effective teams with colleagues of diverse backgrounds
- the inability to judge accurately the expectations of those to whom we report.

Obviously, a willingness to diffuse bias in oneself is key to career success. Below are seven steps for minimizing the biases that hold us back.

The Vision Renewal Process

Step 1: Become aware of your biases. All biases, even the most subconscious ones, periodically toss up a signal to their presence in the form of a thought. Those thoughts are knee-jerk assumptions about the character of someone different from you. Your task is to make a mental note of that first assumption. Once you notice the bias, you can name it and target it for extinction.

I am reminded of my knee-jerk assumption about the black-jacketed, white male firefighter who attended one of my diversity training classes. My bias told me that—because of his occupation, gender, race, and taste in clothes—he *had* to be sexist, *had* to be chauvinist, and, most certainly, *had* to be utterly un-receptive to the material I was presenting.

As a result of that bias, I subtly excluded him from the discussion that was so important to the success of the program.

Imagine my surprise when I later learned that he was a champion for diversity within his firehouse, had been an active participant in the civil rights movement, and was one of the few men in his division to support female firefighters. As embarrassed as I was by my mistake, I'm glad the incident happened. Without it, I might never have become aware of a bias that clearly affected my effectiveness as a trainer.

Step 2: Identify why you hang on to your biases. The reason people are reluctant to let go of biases is that they carry with them certain secondary gains. Some of those gains are real; many are illusory. But in all cases, you must identify those alleged benefits and weigh them against the damage that biases inflict on your career.

Your task is to figure out the secondary gains that accompany the biases you identified in step 1. To help, here's a list of alleged benefits that most often accompany a biased belief:

- relief of guilt
- protection of status
- protection from loss
- protection from emotional pain.

Step 3: Weigh alleged benefits against their harm. That will help you identify which ones to work on first. Let's face it: We all have biases—big ones, small ones, destructive ones, (almost) harmless ones. You need to prioritize those that cause the most damage. For the trainer, that destruction is most likely to be seen when your biases distort your perception of the needs of trainees or, as in the case of the firefighter, of their attitudes toward what you have to offer. That distortion will compromise your effectiveness and, ultimately, reduce the chances of career advancement.

Step 4: Dissect your biases to reveal their weak foundations. Ask yourself this question: Was the original source of my

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bias reliable? In most cases, the answer will be “no.” You might, for example, discover that your bias was spawned by the repeated messages of a frightened parent, from rumor, or from a media that may distort the truth.

Even if a bias grew from actual experience, you’ll be surprised at how unreliable that experience can be. That’s because what experience teaches us about an individual or a group can be grossly distorted by the presence of intense emotion, the trickery of self-fulfilling prophecy, or the filter of expectation.

Step 5: Identify what you share with others. Focus on a common kinship group, which is any population that shares a self- or externally ascribed category that sets it apart from others. That characteristic might be a disability, profession, race, gender, hobby, or any other human dimension. The virtue of a kinship group is that it allows you to belong to many groups at once depending on which characteristic you choose to focus. More important, it enables you to broaden your group to include many populations that you previously thought of as different from yourself.

Broadening a kinship group helps defeat bias because those who share a kinship group are immediately reclassified from “them” to “us.” When that happens, you begin to evaluate members of the former “them” group more fairly. One key strategy for achieving that transition is to focus on common goals; those goals become the defining kinship group. For example, when working with colleagues who are different from you, the common goal of creating a successful learning environment can become a unifying factor that at once weakens biases and creates a winning team.

Step 6: Shove your biases aside. Once you’ve laid the proper foundation, putting aside your biases when they come to mind becomes a mechanical act of habit and will. That’s fortunate because bias-free vision has a cumulative effect: It allows

you to see people accurately; therefore, you’re more likely to find yourself meeting more people who don’t conform to your bias. As you increasingly see people as they truly are, the balance between past biases and real life begins to tip in favor of accuracy and the bias begins to fade. Ultimately, cases of mistaken identity become a rare occurrence that surprises you.

Step 7: Beware the bias revival. Biases have a perverse way of lying in wait for an opportunity to re-exert their influence on your life. Nothing can resurrect a prejudice faster than a negative event involving the object of your bias. Riots, a murder, employee layoffs, a publicized sexual harassment suit, or a case of violence in the workplace can unlock dormant fears. Once that fear is set free, there’s a danger of it being directed, not at the actual perpetrators of the crime, but at those around you who resemble the players in that event. A bias is reborn.

The way to counter the effect of such occurrences is to undertake a deliberate, immediate, and systematic examination of the event. Ask yourself, What do you *really* know about what happened? You may be surprised to find that much of what is prompting your bias is unsubstantiated rumor, misinformation, or exaggerations of the media.

Taking it to the workplace

You may, as step 7 implies, sometimes get discouraged in your efforts to banish biases from your thinking. When that happens, remember that there’s no genetic predisposition to bias, no bias gene rides on your chromosomes, no DNA test can identify who is biased and who is not. Bias is learned. It’s an acquired habit of thought rooted in fear and fueled by conditioning and, as such, can be unacquired and deconditioned. That’s good news because no one can afford to allow his or her distorted vision to interfere with the ability to function effectively, fairly, and successfully in increasingly diverse workplaces.

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Ten Ways to Rid Bias-Related Tension

To turn a bias-heated situation from a damaging career event to a gateway of understanding, try the following suggestions:

1. When a conflict occurs, resist the urge to react immediately.
2. Assess if you’re over-reacting because of a past abusive experience.
3. Resist jumping to conclusions about the actor’s intent.
4. Decide what you want to accomplish during the interaction.
5. Avoid using accusative terms such as *racist* or *sexist*. They only make people defensive.
6. Resist the temptation to find someone guilty of bias without solid and consistent evidence.
7. If you have offended someone accidentally, avoid the temptation to negate his or her feelings. Right or wrong, people feel what they feel.
8. Listen, listen, listen.
9. Work to identify shared responsibility and common goals.
10. (Sometimes) walk away.

Sondra Thiederman, who has trademarked the term *Guerilla Bias*, is a speaker and author on diversity, bias-reduction, and cross-cultural issues. This article is adapted with permission from her book *Making Diversity Work: Seven Steps for Defeating Bias in the Workplace* (Chicago: Dearborn Trade, 2003), which provides practical tools for defeating bias and bias-related conflicts in the workplace; stphd@thiederman.com.

Send submissions to **Development**, T+D, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043; development@astd.org.