

‘Bias-Spotter Partnerships’: Calling Your Team to Action

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The Challenge and the Hope



Layoffs may be rampant and diversity budgets cut to the bone, but, fortunately, there are cost-effective tools we can employ to overcome the biases that block our ability to create truly inclusive workplaces.

The particular tool described here – “Bias-Spotter Partnerships” – is based on these four premises:

1. Awareness of our biases is the best first step toward their resolution
2. Human beings resist identifying our own biases because we feel that having a bias means we are bad people
3. The stress and rush of the workplace deprives us of the luxury of spotting the tiny clues to bias that our behavior and thoughts reveal
4. Team members can serve as trusted aids in bringing about awareness of our biases

Partnership Not Police State

A Bias-Spotter Partnership is the pairing of team members for purposes of observing each other’s behaviors and, ultimately, identifying the biases which might have given rise to those behaviors. Research shows that accountability to another person is a key component of bias awareness and reduction. Not only do the observations of the partner serve to identify manifestations of bias, but the very fact that another person is “on duty” motivates each partner to watch carefully for their own bias-based behaviors.

Even though the Bias Spotter strategy involves observation by another, it is not a thinly disguised mini–police state. It is, instead, similar to an effective two-way mentor partnership in that it is based on trust and shared goals.

In order for this cooperative spirit to be maintained and the process to be effective, these guidelines must be followed:

1. As in any good partnership, both parties must commit to the betterment of the team.
2. Both partners must be willing and able to make all observations in the spirit of mutual support and personal growth; this is not about being accusatory or intrusive.

3. As much as possible within the policies of the company, all observations are to be kept strictly between the partners.

4. Both partners must remember that a given inappropriate behavior may or may not reflect a biased attitude. Calling attention to the behavior is the partner's responsibility, jumping to conclusions about what that behavior means is accusatory and counter-productive.

5. Bias Spotter partners need to be extra vigilant when one of them is functioning in a new environment. This is because a bias may be activated in one setting but not another. Partner A, for example, may not feel or show any bias toward immigrants when in her own department. But, when visiting another location and feeling less comfortable, she may.

6. Bias Spotter partners also need to be vigilant when a partner is rushed or working under an unusual amount of stress. It is at times like these that we crave easy answers and quick solutions. Biases, because they are so readily accessible, are a tempting ally when time is at a premium.

Mutual Responsibilities

Each partner is responsible for observing the decisions, words, and behaviors of the other. He must comment to his partner if he feels a behavior is inappropriate and/or that there is a bias involved. When a questionable behavior is observed, the partner might probe deeper by asking questions like:

1. "That comment seemed a little inappropriate to me. I wonder, have you had any bad experiences with members of that group that might be influencing your attitude?" (If the answer is yes, there might be a bias at play.)

2. "Would you have made the same decision if the people involved were from a different group?" (If the answer is no -- the decision would have been different -- it is possible the decision was influenced by a bias.)

3. "If the person involved knew why you made that decision, would she respect your reasoning or would she feel discriminated against?" (If she would feel discriminated against, a bias is very likely involved.)

4. "Would you like your children or other loved ones to know why you did that?" (If not, the action might be influenced by a bias of which the person is ashamed.)

5. "I keep noticing that you don't coach members of different groups equally. Do you have any thoughts about what that might mean about your attitudes?" (If the answer is that some groups need gentler treatment or, alternatively, won't measure up even if

coached, a bias is clearly at play.)

6. “How would you feel if you learned that a colleague had done the same thing? Would you suspect him of bias? (If the answer is yes, your Bias Spotter partner should become suspicious of his own attitude as well.)

7. “The last three people you promoted were from the same demographic group. I wonder if you might be favoring that group over another. What do you think?” (If your Bias-Spotter partner does not have an objective reason for the promotions, a bias – positive or negative -- might have influenced his decision.)

But, what of the recipient of these comments? She too has a role to play in making the partnership work. How she responds, what she does with the information, and how open she is to learning are central to the success of this process. The recipients responsibilities include:

1. Genuinely listening to what the partner has to say. This does not mean the recipient must automatically agree – after all, the partner’s observations might be wrong – but she must give the partner the opportunity to fully express his view.

2. Genuinely consider the possibility that the partner’s observations are correct. In order to do this, it is helpful to sit with the feedback for a few days before responding. That break gives our natural defensiveness time to settle down and allows for a clearer perspective and more productive response.

3. If, upon careful consideration, the recipient agrees that the behavior does reflect a bias, to explore what next steps she might take to weaken that “inflexible belief.”

Conclusion

The lucky thing about biases is that even the ones that are initially unconscious aren’t very good at staying hidden. All biases eventually reveal clues to their existence in the form of thoughts, words, or behaviors. We may only be favored with a fleeting glimpse out of the corner of our eye, but, if we are vigilant, that glimpse just might be enough to get the healing process started.

Sondra Thiederman is a speaker and author on bias-reduction, diversity, and cross-cultural issues. Her latest book is *Making Diversity Work: Seven Steps for Defeating Bias in the Workplace* that provides practical tools for defeating bias and bias-related conflicts in the workplace. Most recently, she has completed work on the training video *Is It Bias? Making Diversity Work* available through Learning Communications

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