

Defeating Unconscious Bias Training Program Interview with Dr Sondra Thiederman

By Mike Streeter



Though it's been a well understood concept for some time, in recent years unconscious bias been the subject of increased attention. Several highly regarded studies have examined the impact of stereotypes and bias in the workplace and society at large, and point to unconscious bias as a key factor.

In March 2013, [a U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission report](#) identified “unconscious bias and perceptions about African Americans” as one of seven “major obstacles hindering equal opportunities for African Americans in the federal work force.”

Brain science shows that if you are a human being, your brain operates through biases. We constantly and unconsciously make decisions based on limited information and pre-existing patterns. We make fast judgments about what is “normal and safe” and what isn't.

Every day, our biases determine what we see and how we judge those around us, and in many instances, we make those judgements unconsciously.

Everyone unwittingly favors certain types of people based on their upbringing, experience and values because human beings need bias to survive. For example, you might prefer tall people from the Midwest. Left unchecked on the job, though, unconscious bias can affect hiring, assignments, promotions, evaluations and firings.

Dr Sondra Thiederman has been a contributor to our Expert Forum from its inception. Her articles are among the most popular on our site as are her training programs. Her newest training program, Defeating Unconscious Bias, is designed to address the hidden biases that can affect hiring, promoting and team building and challenge an organization's ability to create an inclusive workplace.

I had an opportunity to talk with Dr Thiederman about how she developed this program and what she hopes people will learn from it:

WDN: What motivated you to create a video on unconscious bias?

Dr Thiederman: After working for 25 years in the diversity/inclusion field, I have come to the conclusion that the vast majority of our challenges grow from one source: unconscious bias. I've also noticed that it is conventional wisdom that there is little or nothing we can do about our unconscious biases and that the only way to prevent them from compromising our diversity/inclusion efforts is to learn to work around them.

Of course, the “work around” is important, but it isn’t the only solution. There are specific strategies that each of us can immediately apply to defeat our biases. It is those strategies that the video “Defeating Unconscious Bias” offers the viewer.

WDN: It would seem this would be a tricky subject to depict on screen, were there any challenges in putting it together? If so, how did you overcome them?

Dr Thiederman: You’re right, the subject of unconscious bias can be tough to depict. This is because it is impossible to depict every type of bias or every group involved. The way around this is to identify the principles of how to defeat bias that apply in every situation and to every group. For example, the video provides a technique for identifying unconscious bias within ourselves – this skill can be used regardless of the specifics of the bias or who is involved. The video also talks about several ways to use logical thinking and behavior change to modify our unconscious attitudes. Again, these techniques are applicable in any situation.

Here’s another challenge to discussing unconscious bias on the screen: The risk that viewers will resist the subject matter because they feel guilty about or are afraid to face their own biases. In the video, we overcame this resistance in a couple of ways. First, the Producer cast the narrator roles very carefully. He chose people – one a woman who uses a wheelchair and the other a young man who is visibly of mixed race – whose demeanors are inviting and non-threatening. They come off as friends discussing a problem over a cup of coffee – honest but digestible. Also, the narrators, in their straight-forward but non-confrontative style, make it clear at the start that having a bias does not make someone a bad person. That message alone has the power to diffuse viewer resistance and open them up to the strategies that follow.

WDN: What, in your view, are the most important points for people to get out of the video and the training course it supports?

Dr Thiederman: The most important message of this video training package is this: Most unconscious biases can be fixed by engaging in tangible, measurable behaviors. Sure, there are some biases that are so deeply-rooted and supported by the culture that they are tough to beat, but most of biases held by reasonable people are vulnerable to the kinds of behaviors laid out in the video.

The second most important point is that, because there are actions we can take, we all have a responsibility to get on with the business of defeating our biases. Whether that be because they are interfering with our making productive decisions in the workplace or because they are interfering with our ability to build enriching relationships, it is our job to confront them one by one. And that confrontation is that this video is all about.

I have had the opportunity to review and work with Dr Thiederman’s program and recommend it to any organization that plans to address the subject of unconscious bias as part of its diversity and inclusion initiatives. It is a practical approach to a difficult topic and engages people in an open positive way.

Unconscious bias, not conscious exclusion, is arguably the biggest barrier to creating diverse and inclusive environments today. Dr Thiederman's innovative program will enable your organization to understand it, identify it and ultimately defeat it.

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