



Fake It Till You Make It: The Practical Bias Solution

By Sondra Thiederman, Ph.D.

Have you ever had an attitude that, no matter how hard you tried, you just couldn't seem to change? Maybe you wanted to become more receptive to new kinds of experiences or overcome a tendency to get irritated too quickly. We all have challenges similar to these – for me, it's a pesky tendency to be just a little bit too judgmental. Try as I might, I have had a heck of a time changing what really amounts to a mental habit of thought – a way of thinking that, in turn, dictates my behavior and reactions.

Biased attitudes are like that – sometimes, no matter how hard we try, they just won't go away. The good news is that with bias, as with any other destructive attitude, there is hope. That hope lies in a simple suggestion:

Act as if you don't have the bias.

In other words, "Fake it till you make it."

Psychologist Daryl Bem put it another way: "Saying and doing becomes believing." The psychological truism that underpins this statement is that most of us can't stand doing something that does not conform to what we really feel. This disconnection between action and feeling is called *cognitive dissonance*. Because

cognitive dissonance is so unpleasant, something has to give, and if we're stuck with the behavior, we are forced by our discomfort to change our attitude.

This article will show how to do just that – behave as if you don't have a bias even though that inflexible belief is still bouncing around inside your head. The beauty of “faking it,” is, not only will your new behavior result in a better response from those around you, acting as if you don't have a bias can – strange as it seems – actually can cause that bias to disappear.

I have created a character named Bess to show how beneficial faking behavior can be. ***Here's Your Task:*** As you read what Bess did to overcome her bias, think about what behavior you might change to get the same result.

Ever since she can remember, Bess has had, as she put it, a “thing” about people who don't express themselves well in English; as soon as she hears them speak, her mind is filled with judgments like “unintelligent,” “uncreative,” and “doesn't have much to contribute.”

For whatever reason, Bess just couldn't exterminate this bias. She was aware it existed and aware it distorted her view of many employees who had much to offer the organization, but she still found herself avoiding people who did not articulate up to her standard. The problem became so bad that one staff member, a Latino immigrant, went to Bess and accused her of discriminating against him. Fortunately, they were able to work together to avoid any legal action, but the

incident was, for a while, very disruptive to the diverse work team that Bess' manager was trying so hard to develop.

Fictional Bess felt awful about this incident so, determined to change her behavior, she made a list of the things her bias was causing her to do and the consequences of those behaviors. Here's that list:

1. *Behavior:* Failure to initiate conversations.
Negative consequences: Perception of discrimination. Alienation of the team.
2. *Behavior:* Failure to assign employees to plum projects.
Negative consequences: Employees' inability to gain valuable experience and exposure. Perception of discrimination.
3. *Behavior:* Failure to call on particular team members during meetings.
Negative consequences: Missed opportunities to voice ideas or ask questions. Perception of discrimination.

Having made her behaviors concrete and measurable, Bess set out to do things differently:

1. *Substitute behavior:* Bess consciously began to initiate conversations with people whom she used to ignore.
Positive Consequences: She discovered how much these people had to offer and began to treat them more fairly.
2. *Substitute behavior:* Bess started deliberately assigning those employees who were qualified to good projects.
Positive Consequences: Most of the employees excelled.
3. *Substitute behavior:* Bess began to call on people more equally during meetings and, most important, really listened to what they had to say.
Positive Consequences: She and her team were exposed to different perspectives. Also, the employees were able to gradually hone their communication skills.

The ultimate consequence was that Bess's bias began to fade. It faded for two reasons. First, it faded because the difference between her behavior and her biased attitude subconsciously bothered Bess. The two could not cohabit in the same person. Fortunately, in Bess's case, it was the bias that moved out first.

The second reason her bias faded was that it just couldn't survive the onslaught of positive and varied information that Bess's new behaviors caused to come her way. The better she treated people, the better they responded; the better they responded, the more positive her experience; the more positive her experience, the better she felt about a group whom she had previously dismissed.

Fake it till you make it; it works.

The material in this article is adapted from the 2nd revised edition of Dr. Thiederman's book *Making Diversity Work: Seven Steps for Defeating Bias in the Workplace*. The book is available at www.Thiederman.com.

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