

“Guerilla Bias”™: Diversity’s Hidden Enemy



By [Sondra Thiederman, Ph.D.](#)

Bias=An inflexible conscious or unconscious, positive or negative belief about a particular category of people.

Gretchen listened as the new Cambodian supervisor explained his design idea. She then nodded respectfully, said she’d think about it, and returned to her desk having understood very little of what the man had said. “Saru’s accent was so heavy I just gave up. I’m sure, however, that his ideas were fine; I don’t want to discourage him so I’ll give him the go-ahead.”

Poor Gretchen, she thinks of herself as a “nice” person who would never harbor a bias against someone different from herself. The bad news for Gretchen, and for many other “nice” managers, is that she is, in fact, a carrier of a particularly dangerous strain of bias: “Guerilla Bias™.”

Guerilla Bias™ is dangerous for two reasons. First, like the guerilla warrior who hides behind stands of lush foliage, Guerilla Bias™ lies concealed behind good intentions, kind words, and even thoughtful acts. Second, it is dangerous because it is based on the perverse premise that all women, 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.

Manifested in behaviors ranging from a reluctance to coach a female employee for fear of hurting her feelings to excessive accommodation of cultural differences, Guerilla Bias™ has done more to disadvantage populations than many more obvious and, therefore, eradicable strains of bias.

The Price of Guerilla Bias™ -- Inadequate Coaching

There are dozens of ways in which Guerilla Bias™ interferes with effectiveness in the workplace. Gretchen’s decision not to say anything about Saru’s communication skills is just one—the unwillingness to coach honestly. How often do managers fail to tell the truth out of fear of hurting an employee’s feelings, being sued, or being thought of as prejudiced? All of these are based, you can see, on the underlying premise of Guerilla Bias™ that some employees just don’t have what it takes to hear the truth. The result is

an employee who is never taught how to do the job and, therefore, will never be able to move up in the organization.

The Price of Guerilla Bias™ -- Broken Teams

I remember clearly a woman who approached me following a diversity workshop. She was utterly confused about how to handle what seemed to be a straight forward management challenge. Her confusion surprised me because she had appeared so bright and experienced during the program. I was surprised, that is, until I realized that she was allowing her own personal brand of Guerilla Bias to cloud her judgment. Her side of the conversation went something like this:

I just don't know what to do. I have several Native American employees who are late to work every day. I know they all have reliable transportation so there's really no reason for them to be so lax. All I can figure out is that it must have to do with their culture so I decided to give them some leeway and let them come in any time up to half an hour after everybody else. Now my problem is that the other employees are complaining and want the same flexibility. In my industry, that just isn't going to work. What do I do now?

My response to this woman was a simple, "Why?" "Why would you allow the Native Americans to come in late when everybody else isn't granted the same privilege?" Her answer was to repeat the fact that maybe there was a cultural reason why they couldn't grasp the notion of punctuality. After talking with her a while, it became clear that cultural differences were not the problem, her bias was. She was another nice person guilty of the Guerilla Bias that some groups have needs so special that they have to be given unique privilege. In this case, that attitude had three negative consequences for her efforts to build a harmonious team:

- It demeaned the Native Americans by implying that they were unable to measure up to the same standard as the others.
- It diminished productivity by throwing off the early morning work schedule.
- It created tension among the team and, according to her, caused the non-Native Americans to look down on their colleagues.

The sad thing about these three losses is that they never would have happened had this manager kept her bias in check and held all her employees to the same high standard of punctuality. Of course, reasonable and respectful accommodation of cultural differences is a hallmark of a highly-functioning diverse workplace; bending over backwards, however, at the expense of efficiency and healthy teams is not.

How to Cure Guerilla Bias™

Biases are, when you really think about it, fundamentally an unhealthy habit of thought. Like any habit, identifying the problem is a giant step toward resolution. Fortunately, identifying our biases is fairly easy. Just ask yourself these questions:

1. Do certain assumptions pop into my mind when I encounter someone from a group other than my own? What are those assumptions? Some of those just might be your biases.
2. When I think of groups different from my own, do I think more about how they differ from me than about what we share? What kinds of differences do I focus on?
3. Do I feel more uncomfortable than usual when coaching someone different from myself? Why is that and what particular groups are involved?

Give the answers to these questions some thought. Once your bias is identified, you will be able to recognize it when it arises and acquire the new habit of shoving it aside. With your bias out of the way, you can then get on with the business of respecting your team enough to hold every individual to the same high standard of excellence.

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 (www.learncom.com).

She can be contacted for Webinars and in-person presentations at: www.Thiederman.com, STPhD@Thiederman.com.

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