



“Hidden Biases: The Most Dangerous Enemy”

By Sondra Thiederman, PhD

Have you ever noticed that the greatest dangers in life are those that you can't see? A diagnosable disease may be nasty, but at least you can do more about it than a vague malaise that you hardly notice, but which is eating away at your health and well-being. Whether it be in my workplace or my body, I would rather have a problem I can see and fix than something subtle and elusive.

Bias is one of those problems that can be either obvious and fixable or illusive and undiagnosable. I know, for example, a manufacturing company which recently discovered that some of its employees are members of the Ku Klux Klan. By contrast, there's the CEO who suspects that bias is keeping her gay employees from moving up in the company but she can't quite identify where the problem lies. Who is in bigger trouble? Clearly the CEO whose problem is most difficult to spot.

I call this kind of subtle bias “Guerilla Bias.”™ Like “guerilla warfare” in which the enemy hides behind beautiful foliage, “Guerilla Bias.”™ is difficult to see because it lies concealed in the foliage of what we think of as good intentions, kind words, and so-called thoughtful acts. “Guerilla Bias.”™ is dangerous because it is hidden. It is also dangerous because it is based on the unconscious premise that women, minorities, the disabled, and those who are outside the so-called “majority” population are somehow fragile, quick to explode, or in need of special treatment.

Managers can be particularly guilty of this type of “Guerilla Bias.”™ It shows up in their reluctance — read: “fear” — to provide negative, constructive feedback to minorities and women. Take, for example, the case of Susan, a young Filipina at a Jersey City hospital. She looked at me with complete bewilderment as I struggled to figure out why she and the other Filipinas on her floor were not performing as well as non-Filipino nurses. Practically in tears, she said, “Nobody ever tells us what we are doing wrong.” Susan, like millions of other potentially valuable employees, will never be able to move up in the organization and is clearly lost to an industry which is ever-hungry for qualified, dedicated health care professionals. Without feedback and carefully delineated goals, productivity suffers and un-coached employees like Susan begin to “measure down” to management's expectations.

Not only are valuable employees left behind, but lack of appropriate feedback has other costs as well. For example, if a supervisor fails to provide needed feedback to a minority or female employee, fellow team members are apt to perceive of that person as being

coddled or held to a lower standard thus creating fertile ground for feelings of racism or sexism.

Another type of “Guerilla Bias”™ involves our old friend political correctness. Political correctness makes sense — to a point. There was a time for speech reform. An important message, for example, was sent when we called a halt to the universal use of the pronoun “he.” However, what started out as a reasonable adjustment has mutated into a way to conceal bias. Too many of us carefully choose the best politically correct term, phrasing, or even point of view because that gives us the illusion that we have no biases. In fact, the excessive use of political correctness can mask, even from ourselves, the biases that we have.

Anyone, from any group, of either gender, or of any color can be guilty of “Guerilla Bias.”™ The first step to defeating it is to be honest with ourselves about how we really feel about other groups. Having a bias is not the end of the world; the only shame involved is if we make no effort to improve. The second step is to expose ourselves to the very people who make us uncomfortable. This exposure, along with the knowledge we gain from it, will gradually diffuse the fear and eventually weaken even our most deeply hidden biases.

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