

# How to Defeat Unconscious Bias

By *Sondra Thiederman, Ph.D.*



Anytime we want to change an attitude – which is exactly what a bias is – it is a lot easier to do so if we know that attitude exists. In the case of bias, we know it exists by what we say or by the inflexible thoughts that pop into our brains about different groups.

All-too-often, however, attitudes – including biases – are unconscious and, therefore, fail to produce any obviously recognizable words or thoughts. They, instead, quietly influence our decisions and behaviors in ways so subtle that they completely escape our notice.

That's the bad news, but here's the good news: There is a lot we can do to defeat biases even if they are unconscious and hidden from view. Here are just a few ideas to get these efforts started.

**Display images that depict individuals in positions and situations that are “counter bias.”** Studies show that exposure to images that are inconsistent with bias have the power to change even the most unconscious of beliefs. The reason this works is the same reason that pervasive images cause biases in the first place – the images send a message that gets slowly but surely imbedded in the brain.

What these images are depends on the bias challenges and demographics of your workplace. Examples might be: A person with a visible disability depicted in a position of leadership; a woman depicted in a usually male dominated role (or the other way around); an older person deeply involved with technology. These images might appear on posters, in brochures, on your intranet site or in any other place that is viewed by members of your team.

**Arrange for team members to interact with those who are different from them.** Nothing diffuses unconscious bias faster than contact between people who might have inflexible beliefs about each other's group. This interaction allows people of diverse backgrounds to get to know each other as individuals with common goals, not merely as members of a group about which they might hold an unconscious bias.

***In order for that contact to be most effective it needs to have these characteristics:***

- Be appropriately intimate (not too casual or brief)
- Be among people of roughly equal status
- Be positive in nature

Be among a variety of members of the respective groups (group members of different ages, functions, etc.)

Be oriented toward a shared goal

The specific way you make this contact happen depends on your workplace culture and logistical restraints. One common approach, however, is to arrange for volunteer activities that bring people of diverse backgrounds together around the shared goal of helping others.

**Expose team members to information about individuals from a variety of groups.**

You might, for example, have a team member who is a new American write a short article about her immigrant experience for an in-house publication or invite a person with a disability to share her story at a team meeting. This exposure allows us to realize that all members of a given group are not alike.

**Encourage and motivate team members to treat each other with respect (that is, to act as if there is no bias).** Research shows that acting as if we do not have a bias has the power to reduce that inflexible belief even if we are unaware that it exists. One reason this strategy is effective at reducing unconscious bias is that, the more we treat people with respect, the more positive responses we will receive; the more positive responses we receive, the more time we are apt to spend getting to know individuals from that group; the more individuals we know, the more we realize that all members of the group are not alike. The result? Our bias begins to fade.

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* which 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* which is available through Learning Communications ([www.learncom.com](http://www.learncom.com)).

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