

“How to Dissect and Defeat Your Biases”

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

Everybody has biases – even the nice people who pride themselves on treating others with respect. Having a bias – defined here as “an inflexible belief about a particular category of people” – does not make us bad people, but it does mean that we need to work hard to defeat these attitudes that interfere with our ability to see our fellow team members accurately.

There are several steps to this process of defeating bias. In this article, I’d like to focus on one of the most important and tangible of those strategies: Using a series of questions designed to reveal the weak foundation on which most biases are built.

If you suspect you have an inflexible belief about members of particular groups, take a minute to ask yourself the following questions about that belief:

1. From whom did you learn this bias? When you think back on this person, do you respect her or do you now see that her judgment in this and other areas was suspect?
2. How many members of the target group do you actually know who have the characteristic reflected in your belief? When I say “actually know,” I mean have met and spent meaningful time with – not “know” through rumor or what a friend says or what you always guessed to be the way “those people” are. I suspect that when you answer this question you will find that the actual number of people who conform to your bias is fairly small.
3. How many people do you know who do **not** have this characteristic? If you are making an effort to spend time with the group in question, you will find that you know many individuals who have very different characteristics than your bias would lead you to expect.
4. If you have had an experience with a person who conforms to your bias, was the person really that way or did you just see what you expected to see? If, for example, you have a bias that says “All Asians are great technically, but do not have good management skills,” might you notice only those individuals who in fact are not good managers but fail to see those who prove your bias wrong?

5. If you had an experience with someone who in fact conforms to your bias, is there a chance that that bias caused you to behave in ways that created a self-fulfilling prophecy? Let's say your positive bias says, "All older people are uncreative." Is it possible that, because of that bias, you failed to challenge team members over a certain age and, thereby, deprived them of the opportunity to demonstrate their natural creativity?
6. Has your experience with the target of your bias been intimate in some way or was your meeting perfunctory and formal? In other words, did you really have the opportunity to get to know this person?
7. When you had a bias-generating experience, were you in a neutral emotional state or were you agitated, afraid, or anxious? Emotions such as these can cause us to perceive danger or negativity where none exists.
8. Is your bias influenced by the media? How accurate is that depiction?

The answers to these questions are pretty revealing aren't they? I would wager that they have shown that the source of your bias wasn't quite as solid and reliable as you imagined. Once we can see that our biases stand on a weak foundation, we move one step closer to being able to shove them aside and see people for who they are – individuals with unique qualities and strengths and characteristics.

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*. This video-based training is available through Learning Communications (www.learncom.com).

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