

Stereotypes Will Mess You Up!

By Joe Gerstandt



Expert Forum



The biggest problem with stereotypes? We think they just influence other people.

Most of us think we are not influenced by them in anyway...that is the biggest problem with stereotypes. If we are going to do a better of job of reducing the impact of stereotypes we are going to have to understand them better.

We seem to have a strong tendency to think that stereotypes only influence other people, especially mean people...ignorant people...bad people...hateful people. We seem to believe that stereotypes are something that we consciously, intentionally believe or endorse. But the truth is far more complex than that.

Not only is this the biggest problem with stereotypes, I think it is also one of the biggest challenges to diversity and inclusion work and to building organizations and communities that are innovative, sustainable and live up to their potential.

There is actually a great deal of very insightful research on stereotypes and how they influence our thinking and our decision making, unfortunately that insight does not appear to have found its way into our collective awareness.

Fortunately, there continues to be growing interest and continued research on the impact of stereotypes, including implicit or unconscious bias and the validity > of tools such as the implicit association test (IAT) .

The human brain is a powerful, powerful thing that is always at work , and we are not necessarily aware of everything going on up there. By some estimates only about 2% of our cognitive and emotional processes are conscious and that 2% is impacted by what is going on in the other 98%.

So...once again, stereotypes are not simply about our intentions and whether we are "good people" or not...this is about understanding human nature, having some self-awareness and choosing to be part of the solution.

We have stereotypes about everything; race, gender, age, faith, the car you drive, what part of the country you live in, what kind of work that you do, etc., and we are all influenced by stereotypes.

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Regardless of our intentions, stereotypical ideas and images are likely to influence our behavior and our decision making ...and our behavior and decision making contribute to the outcomes that we see in our organizations and communities, which are very often skewed by race, gender, etc. Not only do stereotypes influence us, but the expectations that we form based on those stereotypes can easily influence the person that we apply them to .

So, what does this mean? It means this...if you want to provide positive leadership in your organization, community or other social group (regardless of your title), you can:

START WITH YOURSELF: Become a student of your own decisions, judgments and feelings about other people...consider what you know about them and what you think you know about them and what those beliefs are based on. Look for and challenge the assumptions that you make about people and work on developing your question asking and listening skills. Get in the habit of seeking out additional perspectives when evaluating the performance or potential of others.

SHARE THE LOVE: Spread the awareness of stereotypes and their impact within your organization, and advocate activities that increase the opportunity for interaction...interaction, conversation, and relationship building all help to provide us with more real information about each other so that we are not filling in the gaps with stereotypes. Be relentless in pushing back on the idea that only "bad people" are influenced by stereotypes and have biased behavior. Champion good, research-based, outcome focused diversity and inclusion training.

You do not have to be a champion of social justice.

You do not have to be a bleeding heart liberal or a do-gooder.

You do not have to be interested in harmony, unity or singing Kumbayah around the campfire.

You simply have to be interested in good decision-making. You simply have to be interested in taking advantage of the human potential that you have access to. Stereotypes can easily prevent us from doing that and that can be very costly. Be good to each other.