

The Power of the Negative

By **Sondra Thiederman, Ph.D.**



After immersing myself in the study of unconscious bias for the last decade, I have come to believe that there is a great deal we can do both to minimize the acquisition of biases and to defeat them. For that reason, most of what I write and speak about is designed to teach and reinforce an optimistic view.

It is because of that philosophy that I hesitated at first to share the research of [John Cacioppo](#) of the University of Chicago. Some of Dr. Cacioppo's work, you see, studied the brain's propensity for focusing on the negative. As I digested the material, however, I realized that, if we are to defeat bias, we need to be alert to how readily the negative can influence our thinking.

The Research

Here's what Dr. Cacioppo did. He showed volunteers a series of positive and negative pictures while recording the electrical activity of their brains. What is intriguing is that Cacioppo found that the volunteers' brains had more electrical activity when they looked at negative pictures than when looking at more pleasant images or even at neutral pictures.

Similar findings came out of the work of British researcher [Elaine Fox](#). She found that even mildly anxious people fixated more on threatening images than on images that were benign. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi took the subject still further to discover that when your mind is drifting randomly, it will, at some point, land on something negative and, when it does, it gets stuck. It turns out negative thoughts are just plain stickier than the positive.

Of course all this makes sense as a survival strategy. After all, if we don't notice the negative, how can we protect ourselves against it?

Where Unconscious Bias Comes In

All this negativity might be great for survival, but bad for unconscious bias. After all, how do we learn biases? We learn them from our environment – messages received from our parents, the media, the culture as a whole. And, if as the research contends, we are prone to noticing and clinging to the most negative of those messages, we are in serious and constant danger of internalizing negative biases.

The Solution

Primal as this tendency to negativity is, there is still action we can take to minimize its ability to create negative unconscious biases in our thinking. That action is to get into the habit of examining negative thoughts or encounters that are at risk of creating a bias.

This means to ask questions such as: Do I have a whole picture of what just happened or might there be a more positive side of this event hidden from my view? Might my perception of this event as negative be colored by past unpleasant experiences with this group? Is part of my negative reaction the fact that I'm fatigued, irritable, or not feeling well? In short, analyzing the event with our conscious mind helps bring it into perspective and minimizes its ability to solidify into a bias.

Think about how this technique might be applied in the workplace. What impact, for example, might it have if, after a major event involving a particular group (911 is a good example), we were to call a meeting to air the issue. The meeting might focus on clarifying what is known and what is pure speculation and on how the team is feeling about the event. You just might be surprised how powerful straight-forward discussion can be at minimizing the negative biases such events are in danger of creating.

Sondra Thiederman is a leading experts on workplace diversity/inclusion and unconscious bias. Since receiving her doctorate in cross-cultural studies from UCLA, she has spent the last 30 years as a speaker, trainer, and author helping professionals in Fortune 500 companies, public sector organizations, and dozens of associations find ways to successfully navigate our increasingly diverse workplaces. Sondra is the author of five books including, most recently, *3 Keys to Defeating Unconscious Bias: Watch, Think, Act*.

Sondra can be contacted for webinars and in-person speaking at stphd@thiederman.com or thiederman.com or telephone (619) 583-4478.

Copyright © 2016 Sondra Thiederman, Ph.D.