

The difference between your first thought and your second thought

By Joe Gerstandt



Expert Forum



“There is prejudice in the world, without a doubt, but you are looking in the wrong place Joe! You can’t afford to be judgmental in the talent business. I am a businessman, and bias is just bad for business.”

This is from a conversation that I had recently with the owner of a recruiting firm.

I would agree that bias can certainly be bad for business; the problem with the above statement is that it rests upon the belief that all bias is intentional and chosen.

Much bias is not chosen or intentional.

A bias is a shortcut, an automatic association, a tool your brain uses to make decisions without using lots of time and energy. Know anyone that has an immediate, powerful (and illogical) response to a Garter snake?

It is an automatic association, it is not a choice, and it is not a product of logic or morality or character.

It has nothing to do with you as a person, but rather your life experience and the stimuli your brain has been exposed to.

I am, as I write this, in the airport about to board a flight. When I get on the airplane and take my seat, I will probably see an air sickness bag in the pocket on the back of the seat in front of me. That air sickness bag is not likely to draw any extra attention from me; it will not stick out in any way because **it is part of what I expect** from the experience of being an airplane. I will also not be surprised or confused by the seat belt, the flight attendant or the battle over the arm rest with my neighbour. They are all expected.

I have not taken any classes about what belongs on an airplane, I have not read any books about it, nor have I spent one single minute of my life trying to memorize what kinds of things belong on an airplane, and what kinds of things do not belong on an airplane. I still know what to expect though; as a result of life experience and stimuli I have been exposed to, my brain has developed a bundle of associations related to being on an airplane.

If I found an air sickness bag waiting on my desk when I return home, it would stick out and draw my attention. It would be unexpected and **I would respond differently to the exact same stimuli** (the visual image of an air sickness bag), because my brain would know that it does not belong there. It is not a part of that

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bundle of things that belong in my office.
and what about our expectations regarding people?

Think of an airline pilot. **Who comes to mind?**

What race, gender, age is that person? When you think of a flight attendant, who comes to mind? What about a police officer, a teacher, a corporate executive a computer programmer, a librarian or a janitor? What race, gender, age is the person that immediately comes to mind when you think of these people? The images generated almost immediately in your head have not walked the gauntlet of your morals and logic, they are produced by automatic associations in your brain and they are not about what kind of person you are and they are not about your beliefs and values....**but they do matter.**

They can easily frame your expectations, making it a little bit easier to notice the talent or potential or fit of the person who meets those expectations and a little bit more difficult to notice the talent or potential or fit of the person who does not.

When people claim to be too nice, too smart, or too capitalist to be biased...**what they are really saying is that they do not understand bias.** All that is required for you and I to be biased is for us to be awake and around other human beings.

This confusion also shows up in conversations about diversity & inclusion when people say things like “just don’t judge people, don’t make assumptions.”

We do judge, and we do make assumptions and this is as natural and automatic as our heart beat. Being confused about this makes it really easy to hid behind our good intentions and do nothing.

We are not responsible for our first thought, but we are responsible for our second thought and our first action. A lot of our personal power can be found in that space between our first and second thought.

What are you doing with your power?

Be good to each other.