

Think About Who You Know: A Key to Defeating Unconscious Bias

By *Sondra Thiederman, Ph.D.*



Don't you just hate powerlessness? Speaking strictly for me, the sense that I can't control something is one of my least favorite feelings.

Let's face it: there are many things in life that we can't control, but lucky for us, bias isn't one of them. I am happy to announce that research has shown there's an awful lot we can do to defeat the unconscious biases that plague our workplaces and prevent us from treating each other with respect.

It's that research that inspired my latest book – *3 Keys for Defeating Unconscious Bias: Watch, Think, Act*. The first key (“Watch”) shows the reader how to become aware of unconscious bias. Keys #2 and #3 – “Think” and “Act” – talk about what we can do to defeat them.

In some ways, my favorite of these is the “Think” chapter. It appeals to me because it is based on this fundamental principle: *Logic is power*. The more logic—the more good sense—we bring to the challenge of defeating bias, the more progress we will make. Logic, I am glad to say, is a weapon well designed to defeat the knee-jerk reactions that past experiences have embedded in our unconscious.

Let's take a look here at just one example of how logic can be applied to defeating bias. Assume for the moment that you have a bias (an inflexible belief) about a particular group. You've become aware of that bias by using the techniques laid out in the “Watch” section of the *3 Keys* book and now you're ready to use your brain to defeat it.

In this case, using your brain involves asking yourself one logical question: How many people do I **actually know** who conform to my bias? When I say “actually know,” I don't mean seen across a parking lot, heard a rumor about, or saw on television. I mean a person with whom you have spent enough time to know as an individual.

I'm sure if you include only those with whom you have had sustained and meaningful contact, you'll find that the number of people who conform to your bias is very small. Sure, there may be one or two who conform, but that's because these inflexible beliefs started somewhere. The key point here is: just because your bias applies in some cases does not mean it applies to every member of that group.

To give you an idea of what I'm talking about, I remember a woman named Hannah who had a virulent bias that caused her to believe that all men are sexist. When she expressed that view to me during an interview, I immediately spotted it as a bias (that

tiny word *all* is a dead giveaway) and asked her the only pertinent question: “How do you know that all men are sexist?”

Hannah’s answer revealed the bad luck that, in her twenty-five-year career, she had been cursed with three male bosses who had blatantly sexist attitudes and management practices. Because her experience with these men was clearly emotionally intense, it is little wonder that a bias was born.

That’s not to say that her attitude was logical—it wasn’t. If we do some research and look at Hannah’s experience separately from her understandably intense emotion, a peculiar picture emerges. My research revealed that, during Hannah’s twenty-five-year career, there were approximately 125 million men who were of the age and profession to have been her boss. Now, I’m not saying that of those 125 million there weren’t more sexist men than just Hannah’s maligned 3, but still, to base an opinion upon experience with 3 out of 125 million people just doesn’t make sense.

Now it’s your turn. Let’s see how well you do at bringing the evidence for your biases into logical perspective.

Antibias Activity: It’s Who You Know

Pick a bias of which you are aware. Once you have identified the bias, take a piece of paper and list all the people you **really** know who actually conform to that inflexible belief. (I suspect it will be a very short list.)

This article is based on Sondra Thiederman’s latest book, *Three Keys to Defeating Unconscious Bias: Watch, Think, Act*. The book can be purchased for \$10.95 at <http://thiederman.com/shop/>.

Sondra Thiederman is one of the nation’s leading experts on workplace diversity/inclusion, cross-cultural business, and bias reduction. Since receiving her doctorate in cross-cultural studies from UCLA, she has spent the last 25 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 can be contacted for webinars and in-person speaking at stphd@thiederman.com or www.thiederman.com or telephone 619-583-4478.

Copyright 2015 Sondra Thiederman, Ph.D.