

Time: Your Weapon Against Bias

By *Sondra Thiederman, Ph.D.*



Let's face it, biases are creepy. They lurk in our unconscious minds just waiting to pop up in the form of disrespectful actions or miss-guided decisions about who people are, what they need, and what they are good at. To make matters worse, this "popping up" is most apt to happen when we are the busiest which, paradoxically, is often the very time that making the correct decision is most important.

Fortunately, science hints at a solution to this problem that just might make it easier for all of us to manage our biases. This particular study was conducted by a psychologist named William Cunningham. Cunningham based his work on earlier studies that tracked the speed with which the alarm centers of the brain spike when white subjects are shown of black faces.

This spike amounts to a primitive "jumping to conclusions" about the nature of people different from ourselves. What Cunningham did was modify the methodology of the earlier research just slightly. He made a tiny change, but that change produced significantly different results, results that have a significant impact on how we conduct ourselves in today's rushed and stress-filled workplaces.

Cunningham's modification had to do with time. In the earlier studies, the faces were shown for only 30 milliseconds – removed so quickly that they could only be "seen" subconsciously. Cunningham decided to find out what would happen if the pictures were viewed for a longer period of time—525 milliseconds.

525 milliseconds is still too brief for the conscious mind to grasp and yet the extended time was long enough to change the brain's response. Although there was still a spike when the different faces appeared, the spike was not in the alarm center, but in the part of the brain that controls rational thought.

The upshot of this—and the very good news—is that, if given long enough, the conscious and rational brain does have the power to override even our most primitive biased instincts. This explains why we tend to react with more bias when rushed to make quick decisions. There is simply no time for the rational brain to become engaged.

This conclusion sends a message that has immediate application in the workplace:

We must give the rational part of our brains a chance to get in gear before reacting instinctively to someone who is different from ourselves.

In other words, let's get in the habit of taking a beat, a breath, or a moment even in the midst of the most extreme chaos and rush. That beat – that few seconds of delay –

could be the difference between a biased decision and the ability to see people for who they really are.

This article is based on Sondra Thiederman's books, *The Diversity and Inclusion Handbook* and *Making Diversity Work: Seven Steps for Defeating Bias in the Workplace*. Feel free to share it with your colleagues.

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.