

Unconscious Bias: The Contact Solution

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Franklin Roosevelt was President, the Great Depression was raging, and Jean Harlow was the reigning queen of Hollywood – all this while the first serious studies of unconscious bias and prejudice began to emerge. In particular, much of the focus of this 1930's research was on answering this central question:

Can contact between groups reduce prejudice and defeat unconscious bias?

Almost universally, the answer has been a resounding “Yes!” There are many reasons why contact can reduce bias, most basic of which is the fact that the contact allows us to see people who are in some way different from ourselves as individuals rather than merely as members of a group about which we might have a bias. (For more information on how this process works, see the links at the bottom of this article.) When I say contact, I'm not talking about just any contact. To be effective at reducing bias, it needs to have these characteristics:

Characteristic #1: The contact is focused on a shared goal. Picture a project team consisting of various ages, ethnicities, races, and thinking styles all working together toward a shared result. This principle of a shared goal is most clearly seen in sports teams, combat troops, or human beings of diverse backgrounds encountering a shared crises. I recall years ago, when researching my first book, Jim Adamson – formerly the CEO of Denny's, Burger King, and Kmart – telling me about his transformational experience when he – a white high school student – joined a primarily black basketball team. As he describes it, any tension between him and his mates melted in the heat of their enthusiasm for achieving their shared goal of winning the game.

Characteristic #2: The contact is unhurried and reasonably relaxed. It is in that state of relaxation that diverse people get to know each other as individuals – not merely as members of another group. Even the sports team focused on winning the game has time in the locker room or team bus for the individual conversations that can shift their focus from difference – and bias – to individuality.

Characteristic #3: The contact is designed to encourage empathy. Empathy – the ability to engage in another person's feeling – reduces bias in two ways. For one, it leads each of us to feel more positively about others. Second, it influences people to behave in ways that are supportive of each other which, in turn, elicits positive responses each of which is a powerful tool for changing attitudes – even the

unconscious variety.

Shared goals, improved communication, empathy – those might be keys to defeating bias, but they also sure sound like a productive workplace to me.

Sources on How Contact Helps Defeat Bias:

Blog Posts:

Can Bias Be Defeated: What the Research Reveals, Part I: <https://thiederman.com/can-bias-be-defeated-what-the-research-reveals-part-i/>

Can Bias Be Defeated: What the Research Reveals, Part III: <https://thiederman.com/can-bias-be-defeated-what-the-research-reveals-part-iii/>

How to Defeat Unconscious Bias: <https://thiederman.com/how-to-defeat-unconscious-bias/>

Reduce Bias by Cultivating Common Ground: <https://thiederman.com/reduce-bias-by-cultivating-common-ground/>

Handbook:

3 Keys to Defeating Unconscious Bias: Watch, Think,

Act: <https://thiederman.com/product/3-keys-to-defeating-unconscious-bias-watch-think-act/>