

# Cultivating Common Ground: Your Answer to Bias Reduction

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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.

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“In minor ways we differ, in major we’re the same.” Maya Angelou

## **Treading on Common Ground**

No one would deny that diversity and inclusion is a journey. Some, however, would disagree on just what route that journey should take. Certainly, at the very least, it is from inequity to fairness, from inequality to equality, from injustice to justice.

The journey does, I’d argue, travel another route as well. That is, from an “us and them” to an “us” mentality. This amounts to beginning to focus, not only on how we differ, but also on what we have in common.

This is not to say that we don’t still value diversity in our organizations. Of course we do – identifying Common Ground in no way negates the need and ability to honor how we differ. I like to say that valuing diversity and cultivating Common Ground are simply two sides of the same inclusion coin.

This balance between difference and commonality may seem a bit awkward – something like the childhood trick of simultaneously rubbing your stomach in one direction and your head in another – but, like those challenging gestures, the two are not incompatible.

## **How Does Awareness of Common Ground Reduce Bias?**

Bias – defined here as an “inflexible positive or negative, conscious or unconscious belief about a particular category of people” – is, in my view, your biggest barrier to creating a truly inclusive workplace. Not only does the presence of bias create hurt feelings and tension, it prevents your organization from seeing people for their individual characteristics. As a result, you are unable to benefit from the best talent available.

That’s where Common Ground comes in. Common Ground, you see, is fertile ground. It is in this rich soil that the ability to see people as individuals – not merely members of a group different from ourselves – is cultivated.

One of the tools we use to cultivate this ground is the concept of “kinship group.” A “kinship group” is “any population that shares a self- or externally-ascribed characteristic that sets it apart from others.” This characteristic might be a disability, race, hobby, gender, age, or any other of dozens of human dimensions.

By thinking of group categories in terms of kinship groups, we are better able to understand that each of us belongs to many groups at once. Also – and this is the most important part – to

see that we share membership in many of those kinship groups with individuals whom we otherwise think of as different from ourselves.

An Asian-American might, for example, initially see her Hispanic colleague only in terms of how different he is from her: Hispanic, not Asian; man, not woman. If, however, she has the opportunity to know him better, she very likely will begin to see him as a variety of things, not all of which are “different.” Perhaps she runs into him at the grocery store and discovers that, like her, he is a gourmet cook (a shared kinship group); maybe she learns he is adopted, just as she is; perhaps she hears him sing at a company party and recognizes that they both have a passion for vintage Beatles music.

All of a sudden, she and her colleague are gifted with several categories—several kinship groups—that they in fact share – they have discovered Common Ground. Were she to shift her thoughts about him from an emphasis on Hispanic and a man (different) to gourmet cook and a Beatles fan who can sing “Hey Jude“ (the same), she has created a new kinship group of which they both are members. He is no longer a “them”; he is now an “us.” It is at that point that the demolition of even the most sub-conscious of biases begins.

You see, when we shift people from “them” to “us,” an important change in how we think occurs. That change is based on the fact that human beings tend to see members of other groups as all alike; in essence, we indulge in inflexible beliefs (biases) about “them” just because they are not “us.” On the other hand, we see members of our own group as individuals who are different from each other in a variety of ways. So, once we are an “us,” we automatically see our fellow kinship group members with a less biased eye.

What does this mean for your workplace? It means that the more effort we make to construct systems and activities that bring people of diverse backgrounds together so they can identify and form shared kinship groups, the less bias we will have in our workplaces. This does not mean we stop respecting and valuing difference, merely that we no longer allow that difference to blind us to the Common Ground on which we stand.

The balance of this article will provide four strategies for creating this awareness along with several activities you can use in your workplace to move the process of bias reduction along.

## **Strategy #1 - Keep Common Ground Top of Mind**

Do you remember the last time you bought a new car? Did you notice something odd that happened after you decided what make, model, and color you were after? That’s right, you started noticing that particular vehicle everywhere.

In fact, it’s not the number of automobiles that has changed, but rather your awareness of that particular model. Once you decided you wanted it, the car became forefront, or top-of-mind, in your thinking. Once it was top-of-mind, your chosen model no longer blended in with every other vehicle on the freeway and you noticed it everywhere.

These heightened observation skills happen because of a fundamental truth of how the mind works: We notice what we care about. This phenomenon is called “saliency determination.” When we care and are excited about the imminent purchase of that nice black shiny SUV, our

mind almost magically seeks out examples to the point that you can spot one cruising three lanes away.

This same principle applies to noticing what we have in common with people. As we begin to see the value in identifying what we share, we will – as with that new car – care more about it. When we care more it, we will automatically begin to notice our commonalities and gradually see the benefits of balancing both valuing diversity and identifying Common Ground.

So, what can you do to keep Common Ground top-of-mind? Here are some suggestions:

- Integrate the notion of identifying what we have in common into your diversity/inclusion training. Balance the importance of valuing and acknowledging difference with the simultaneous examination of what we have in common.
- Utilize the activities at the end of the article to help team members focus on shared values, tastes, and life experiences.
- Encourage team members of diverse backgrounds to write intranet blog posts or company newsletter articles about their background and invite others to discuss what similar experiences they have had.
- Model the principle of Common Ground by relating to those who are in some way different from you and, thereby, uncovering what you share.

## **Strategy #2 - Create Workplace Opportunities for Cross-Group Contact**

Cross- or inter-group contact is another effective way to create an awareness of shared kinship groups and Common Ground. This contact is most effective if it has these seven characteristics:

- It is appropriately intimate
- It is unhurried
- It is among people of roughly equal status
- It is sanctioned by an authority figure
- It is positive in nature
- It is among a variety of members of the respective groups (group members of different ages, functions, etc.)
- It is oriented toward a shared goal

Any kind of club, volunteer program, or social event at which diverse people mix will do the job. The specific way you make this contact happen depends on your workplace culture and logistical restraints.

Northrop Grumman, for example, has numerous clubs, many of which meet during the noon hour to organize their free-time activities. These clubs are focused on a wide variety of interests including, among others, cigars, cooking, vintage aircraft, scrap booking, karaoke, and even on the bumpy thrills of four wheel driving. Amgen, a leader in human therapeutics and biotechnology, is another club-conscious organization. It encourages the formation of kinship groups around interests such as Toastmasters, soccer, and bicycling. Amgen employees even have the opportunity to join the company's very own salsa band. Similarly, medical technology manufacturer Gen-Probe brings employees together around physical activities such as aerobics classes, sand volleyball games, and yoga instruction.

The Xerox Leadership Association beautifully illustrates the kinship-producing formula of bringing people together around volunteer work. Its membership consists of diverse people who arrange for charitable activities during which employees of all backgrounds can mix. Another example is Macy's Partners in Time program which yearly brings together 67,000 employees, families, and friends to volunteer in various programs throughout the country. Key Bank of Oregon is yet another good example. The bank closes its branches once a year at one o'clock in the afternoon, leaving only a skeleton crew in charge. The rest of the team disperses into the community to work in homeless shelters and perform other valuable services such as cleaning gutters for the elderly.

It is in this world of volunteerism where some of the most significant kinship groups can be formed. This is because volunteer efforts combine time together with that all-important kinship group forming element—a common goal.

No matter what the nature of the event or effort, it will serve two important functions. First, it will, unto itself, form a new kinship group in which all participants have membership and, second, it provides the opportunity for diverse people to get to know each other and, in turn, identify still more areas of commonality.

### **Strategy #3 – Create Cross-Group Employee Resource Groups**

Employee Resource Groups have for years been the backbone of diversity efforts in many companies. Ever since they were first conceived in the late 1970s, these groups have been organized around some shared identity. Initially, they focused on shared ethnicity and race. Then they branched out to include women's groups, and, still later, shared sexual orientation. Groups such as these have long served important functions, not only as employee support opportunities, but also as valuable business resources for the organizations of which they are a part.

It is relatively recently, however, that corporations have taken the concept of ERGs one step further and, thereby, begun to use them, whether they realized it or not, to defeat bias in their workplaces. These newer groups are organized not around difference (women as different than men; Latinos as different from Asians), but around what people, who might be different in ethnicity, race, sexual orientation or gender, have in common. This commonality might be a shared interest, life challenge, or any other unifying factor.

Examples of such groups are growing; here are just a few.

- Interfaith Network (Ford Motor Company)
- Veterans Affinity Group (General Motors)
- Military Reservists (Microsoft)
- Part-Time Workers (Abbott Laboratories)
- Parents at Amex (American Express)
- Adoption Network (AstraZeneca)
- Deaf/Hard of Hearing (Microsoft)
- Family Caregivers Network (Kimberly-Clark)
- FlexImpact [for employees working flextime] (Microsoft)
- Junior Exempt Employee Forum (Booz Allen Hamilton)
- Attention Deficit Disorder (Microsoft)

No matter what its nature, the shared interest or need that defines the ERG becomes a kinship group that allows members to know each other as unique individuals rather than as members of a group different from themselves. As with any other of these suggestions, the specific nature of a cross-group ERG you create depends on the demographics of your organization and the challenges it faces.

## **Strategy #4 - Focus on Shared Goals**

Imagine that you are stuck between floors in an elevator. With you are a few people of diverse backgrounds whom you have never met before.

Because you are stuck, it doesn't take long for you and your fellow "prisoners" to abandon all pretense of conventional elevator etiquette. You no longer stand erect and stare forward – looking neither to the left nor to the right. And, certainly, you no longer pretend you are alone. The normal silence is quickly broken with the sounds of "oh oh's" and "oh no's."

Also, once the reality hits that the elevator is malfunctioning, any fine distinctions about who belongs to what demographic category instantly dissolves – you are now all members of a newly created and, of necessity, inclusive kinship group that can rightly be called an "us". In other words, a large dose of commonality kicks in.

In this case, your particular "us" is composed of people who share the stark terror of being trapped in a small space, out of control, and possessing no knowledge of when or how the "adventure" will end. The group now has one shared priority – one common goal: get the heck out of there – the sooner, the better.

Certainly, an inclusive group born of a temporary experience like being trapped in an elevator has a short life span, but the principle of sharing a common goal applies equally to more lasting situations.

Shared goals, you see, have the power to fill the fissure that separates us. When people realize that they are all "in the same boat" – striving to achieve the same thing, it is much easier to see past the differences to the common humanity that unites us. In the case of our stranded elevator passengers, nobody cares that the woman with the engineering skill to get them out is in a wheelchair or that the man with the ability to keep everyone calm is shabbily dressed.

None of those distinctions matter. That elevator – like your workplace – is inhabited with human beings who are in some ways different and in some ways alike. It is that proximity, that time together and that shared goal that shifts each inhabitant's focus from the differences among them – and the biases they hold – to the Common Ground they share.

## **Appendixes**

### **Appendix A: Why Else is Identifying Common Ground a Good Idea?**

We've talked a lot about how identifying what we have in common reduces bias, but the benefits go beyond even that. In real estate, value is all about "location, location, location." In the workplace, value is most often measured by "productivity, productivity,

productivity.” It is in three contributions to productivity that Common Ground shows itself to be such a treasured commodity.

1. Teams that share an awareness of commonality experience increased trust among themselves. This trust, in turn, means that individuals more readily voice their ideas to other members of the group and, equally important, are more willing to share bits and pieces of information that can lead to the success of a project.
2. Team members that can identify common values have been shown to feel increased work satisfaction and, in turn, commitment to the task.
3. Those who are aware of what they have in common with their fellow workers tend to feel more empathy toward them. Empathy is the capacity to relate to another person’s feelings and is key to the ability to have productive conversation, listen to another’s views, and support others in times of stress.

## **Appendix B: Training Activities for Building Common Ground**

This Appendix contains three activities that will aid your team in identifying the needs, values, and interests that they have in common.

### **Activity #1: The Question Game**

**Primary Purpose:** To create an awareness of commonalities with people whom we normally think of as different from ourselves.

**Facilitator Preparation:** Beginning with the list below, prepare a list of questions that are appropriate to your corporate culture and diversity goals.

**Facilitation Note:** Be prepared to call attention to the numerous commonalities that this activity brings to light.

#### **Process/Instructions:**

1. Invite a volunteer to function as the “primary responder” to the questions you supply. If time allows for more than one person to be the responder, try to achieve as much visible diversity as possible among those chosen.
2. Select five questions from the list you have prepared. As you ask each question out loud, have both the primary responder and the rest of the group write down their answers. (Note: Depending upon the time allotted and the size of the group, the number of questions asked can be increased or decreased.)
3. After all the questions are asked, have the primary responder provide his or her answers, one by one. After each answer is read, ask the audience if any of their answers are similar to those provided by the speaker. If so, have them share the details. Point out that we have a lot more in common than we realize. This point is particularly powerful if the two people who answered similarly are, in other ways, very different from each other.
4. Discuss the idea of shared kinship groups and how even answering a question the same way creates a kinship group around the values, tastes, and interests reflected in that answer.

5. Encourage participants, once they return to the workplace, to build on the commonalities that this activity has brought to light.

**Suggested Questions:**

- What would you like to have written on your tombstone?
- What is your favorite city, and why?
- What single non-living item would you rescue from a fire, and why? The item needs to be very specific (for example, not “photographs,” but an individual photograph).
- If you could have a t-shirt printed with any message, what would that message be?
- What do you remember about your favorite holiday or tradition?
- What one piece of advice did your parents give you?
- If you could change any one thing about your life, what would it be?
- If you could go anywhere for two weeks, where would it be?
- If you could live any time in history, when would that be and why?
- If you could have lunch—just one-on-one—with any living person whom you do not know, who would that be?
- What one item, other than a boat, would you take to a deserted island?
- If given a million dollars to spend freely, how would you spend it?
- What one person, living or dead, do you most admire?
- What talent would you most like to have?
- What are you most proud of about yourself or your achievements?
- If you could live anywhere, where would that be?
- Where do you fall in birth order in your family? What do you like and not like about that position?
- If you could be anyone in history, whom would that be?
- If you had to compare yourself to any animal, what would it be?
- Excluding your own, whom would you like to be your parents? Why?
- If you could use one adjective to describe yourself, what would it be?

**Activity #2 – Version #1: “Did You Feel It, Too?” (Self-Generated Events)**

**Primary Purpose:** To create empathy and, therefore, a sense of Common Ground, through an awareness of shared emotions and life experiences.

**Facilitation Note:** Participants listen to, or read, a vignette and then attempt to empathize by identifying in themselves a similar experience or emotion. As you give the instructions, emphasize that what we are after is recognition of a shared type of emotion or experience. The emotion the responder feels does not, however, need to be as extreme as that reflected in the initial event.

**Facilitator Preparation:** Prepare an instance from your own life that can serve as an example to the group.

**Facilitation Note:** We suggest that the initial sharing described here be done in pairs, triads, or small groups. This step would be followed by discussion with the group as a whole. The event/emotion can be about any aspect of living—it does not have to relate to bias or diversity—and it can be positive or negative.



**Process/Instructions:**

1. Divide the participants into pairs, triads, or small groups.
2. Instruct one person in each group to describe a positive or negative experience to which she had a strong emotional reaction. Emphasize that the most important part of this sharing is not so much the details of the story but the feelings that the event evoked.
3. As other members of the small group listen to the story, they are to look within their own history to see if they have had similar experiences or have shared similar emotions.
4. If the group is divided, reconvene for discussion: What unexpected similarities did you uncover? How did this feel? What new empathy-based kinship groups did you identify?
5. As participants share their feelings, take careful mental notes of the shared values, interests, and challenges that emerge. Call attention to these commonalities especially as they arise between people who are in some way visibly different from each other.
6. Encourage participants, once they return to the workplace, to build on the commonalities that this activity has brought to light.

**Activity #2 – Version #2: “Did You Feel It, Too?” (Prepared Case Studies)**

**Facilitator Preparation:** Using the examples listed below as a starting point, prepare short cases that reflect your diversity/inclusion goals. The events can be positive or negative and do not have to be diversity- or bias-related.

**Facilitation Note:** This activity is particularly appropriate to use in short management meetings or employee orientation sessions.

**Process/Instructions:**

1. Divide the participants into pairs, triads, or small groups.
2. Provide each small group with a pre-prepared case study to which they can react.
3. Instruct one person in each group to read the case study out loud.
4. As other members of the small group listen to the case and to look within their own history to see if they have had similar experiences or have shared similar emotions.
5. If the group is divided, reconvene for discussion. Ask them to talk about what similar emotions or experiences they might have had to that depicted in the case study.
6. As participants share their feelings, take careful mental notes of the shared values, interests, and challenges that emerge. Call attention to these commonalities especially as they arise between people who are in some way visibly different from each other.
7. Encourage participants, once they return to the workplace, to build on the commonalities that this activity has brought to light.

**Sample Thumbnail Events:**

- **Case 1:** Trieu arrived in this country as a child and immediately enrolled in public school. Because his fifth-grade teacher could not pronounce his name, she renamed him Terry. Trieu felt ambivalent about

what the teacher did. On the one hand, he was proud to be an American; on the other, he felt that his ethnic identity was being ignored.

- **Case 2:** Hal worked hard in college but was unable to get a job after graduation because affirmative-action policies appeared to be giving preference to women and minorities. He felt frustrated and angry.
- **Case 3:** Susan was invited to an elegant banquet and wanted to look her best. However, because of her wheelchair, she could not get up the steps to her hairdresser—there was no access for people with disabilities. Susan felt excluded, frustrated, and embarrassed.
- **Case 4:** Henry’s plans for the future received a big boost when he won \$150,000 in the lottery. At first, everyone at work seemed happy for him. But, after a while, he realized that most resented his good fortune.
- **Case 5:** No one can deny that Cindy is a beautiful woman. Because of that beauty, she has trouble being taken seriously in her workplace. Despite her advanced degrees and talent, many of the people with whom Cindy works feel she got where she is because of her appearance, not because of her skills.
- **Case 6:** The year was 1963, and Greg had just arrived in this country. We find him standing outside a pair of “colored” and “whites only” bathrooms in Mississippi, gazing down at the brown skin on his arm, wondering which bathroom to use.

“Either we are pulling together or we are pulling apart.”  
Kobi Yamada

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. She is the author of five diversity/inclusion books including *The Diversity and Inclusion Handbook*.

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