

**Sample Chapter** from the handbook [\*3 Keys to Defeating Unconscious Bias: Watch, Think, Act\*](#) by Sondra Thiederman, Ph.D. Not for reproduction or use without permission.

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## Key #3

### ACT

#### **The Virtue of ACTing**

Let's now move away from what is going on inside us, from things like WATCHing our thoughts and THINKing about the irrational origins of our biases. It's time to take ACTION. The ACTIONS we will talk about here include ACTing as if the bias does not exist and ACTing to identify what we have in common as a means of defeating bias.

#### **ACT as If the Bias Does Not Exist**

Here's something that might surprise you: ACTing as if your bias does not exist is one of your most powerful antibias tools. With that in mind, does this ancient adage seem familiar?

*Attitude follows behavior.*

Aristotle figured that out way back in 300 BC, and it has been proven by behavior psychologists dozens of times since.

The principle that applies here is the same one discussed in the THINK chapter—cognitive dissonance. There we talked about the fact that human beings can't stand the psychological discomfort we experience when we try to hold opposing values in our minds (a bias and the value of equality, for example).

Here the dissonance sets in when we try to **believe** one thing (our bias) while at the same time **behaving** in a way that runs counter to that bias. When that happens, something has to give. If we work hard enough at keeping our behaviors out of line with our inflexible belief, the bias eventually begins to fade.

Besides cognitive dissonance, there's another reason that self-consciously ACTing in an unbiased way reduces bias. This has to do with the neural pathways in the brain that connect one part of this magnificent organ to another.

These pathways are formed in exactly the same way as the rut that runs in a muddy circle in my backyard. Unsightly as it is, I have affection for that rut because it was formed by the joyful running in circles of our two Labrador Retrievers. That rut is my yard's "neural pathway." Similarly, in the case of the brain, the pathways are formed and strengthened by repeated behaviors.

But what happens if the dogs decide one day to change their route? A new rut will form, and the original will gradually fill in until it virtually disappears. The same process applies to our brains. When we change our behaviors, the pathways begin to change. That change, in turn, makes the new—unbiased—behaviors easier and easier to execute. And through time and repetition, they become essentially automatic.

### **“ACTing” Step by Step**

At the start of this book, I asked, “Do you really want to take this on?” The reason for that question was that it takes courage to face our biases. I'm now calling on you to show another type of courage. What is needed here is the courage to look at past behaviors that might have reflected a biased attitude and make the commitment to change.

Take, for example, the courage shown by a team leader named Bess. Bess, although a good person, had a bias that seriously compromised her ability to do her job.

Ever since she could remember, Bess had, as she put it, a “thing” about people who couldn't express themselves well in English. Whether the reason was that English was their second language or that they lacked formal education, as soon as she heard them speak, Bess's mind was filled with judgments like “unintelligent,” “will never be able to do the job” (even if the job has little to do with communication skills), “uncreative,” and “doesn't have much to contribute.”

Bess wasn't proud of these views and knew they didn't make sense. She also felt awful when one Latino employee complained that she was discriminating against him. The problem was, because of her upbringing and past experiences, Bess just couldn't seem to shake the bias—that is, until she learned about how the brain works and that if she ACTed as if her bias did not exist, it might just disappear.

So let's take Bess through this process of “ACTing as if.” As the process unfolds, I encourage you to think of a bias of your own and see if you can figure out how you might ACT to defeat it by using this technique.

Before we get started, keep this in mind: The bias that you or Bess holds is tenacious and sneaky. It will do all it can to influence you to behave in a biased way. Because of this sneakiness, it is important that the new behaviors have these characteristics:

- Be specific (“I will say good morning every time I see this person,” not “I will be more friendly”).
- Be measureable (“I will do this three times a week,” not “I will do it often”).
- Be observable by yourself and others (“I will take notes when people speak up at meetings,” not “I will listen more carefully”).

With these parameters in mind, here is the account of Bess’s journey.

### ***Bess’s Journey***

Step 1: Bess identified one behavior that her bias was tricking her into doing.

**Biased Behavior:** Bess realized that when the targets of her bias spoke at meetings, she didn’t really listen to what they had to say. To make matters worse, she received feedback that her lack of attentiveness was obvious to the group.

Step 2: Bess then identified the negative consequences—for herself and others—of this behavior. The purpose of this step was to motivate Bess to make the change.

**Negative Consequences:** By not hearing the ideas of everyone on her team, Bess risked missing out on creative approaches while simultaneously alienating individuals who might benefit both her and the company.

Step 3: The third step in Bess’s journey grew naturally out of the first and second. She described specific, measureable, observable ACTIONS that ran directly counter to the biased behavior.

#### **Bias-Free Behaviors**

1. She asked each person who spoke at the meeting at least one respectful but probing follow-up question regarding his or her remarks. Not only did this commitment force Bess to listen so that she could formulate a pertinent question, it also demonstrated to the group that she was really paying attention.

2. She took notes on everyone's remarks. Again, the process of taking notes forced her to listen while showing others that she cared about what was being said.

Step 4: Bess then committed to engaging in these two behaviors consistently and for long enough to begin to weaken her bias.

Behavior Time Commitment: In Bess's case, because she had meetings once a week, she committed to engaging in these behaviors for three weeks in a row.

Step 5: Bess then observed the positive responses her new behaviors triggered in others.

The ultimate consequence of these changes in behavior was that Bess's bias began to fade. It faded for three reasons.

First, it faded because the dissonance (the incompatibility) between her bias-free behavior and her biased attitude subconsciously bothered Bess. The two could not cohabit the same person. Fortunately, in Bess's case, it was the bias that moved out first. Second, as Bess continued to behave differently, her brain gradually rewired itself to reflect both the new behaviors and the unbiased thoughts they spawned.

The third reason her bias faded was that it just couldn't survive the onslaught of positive and varied information that Bess's new behaviors caused to come her way. The better she treated people, the better they responded; the better they responded, the more positive her experience; the more positive her experience, the better she felt about a group that she had previously dismissed.

Try "ACTing as if"—it works.

## **ACT to Identify and Cultivate Common Ground**

Gay/straight, black/white, American/foreign national, man/woman, generation X/baby boomer—it sure seems to me we have a lot of language that refers to how we are different.

That's fine. Differences matter—they are to be respected and honored and valued. But we should also respect, honor, and value what we have in common. This is important for several reasons, not the least of which is this one:

*The more we focus on commonalities, the less power our biases have to control our thoughts.*

I'm not, of course, for one moment saying we stop valuing diversity—that would be a disaster. What I am saying is that it is time we begin to balance honoring difference with looking at what we have in common. These two attitudes are by no means incompatible, and in fact, we might think of them as two sides of the same inclusion coin.

## **How Common Ground Reduces Bias**

Identifying what we have in common reduces bias for a couple of reasons. First, once we identify commonalities, we no longer place our sole focus on how the other person is different and in turn on any inflexible beliefs we may associate with that difference.

If you think about it, this makes sense. When we look at how people are different—be it by race or age or culture or any other dimension of diversity—we automatically put characteristics on that difference. Those characteristics often become our biases. The upshot of this is that if we balance our focus on differences with attention to what we have in common, our biases have less to cling to and less reason to exist.

Looking for commonalities also reduces bias because human beings tend to like people with whom they have identified similarities. And it gets better: we also are fairer to those with whom we feel an affinity.

Taking all this into consideration, looking for what we have in common—while valuing diversity—simply makes bias-reducing sense. And that brings us to the ACTION needed to bring common ground into the fight against bias.

## **Reach Out to People Different from You**

This reaching out might mean sitting next to someone different in the cafeteria, stopping in the hall to have a conversation with a teammate whom you barely know, or joining a club whose members are from many diverse groups.

I know this seems like common sense, but there's more to it than just sitting down and having a conversation. In fact, there are several ways to make this contact particularly fruitful in terms of identifying common ground and, in turn, reducing bias.

First, if at all possible...

*The contact should be relaxed and informal.*

An unhurried tone is most conducive to the kind of interpersonal contact that will reveal shared values, needs, and interests.

Second, during your time together...

*Ferret out shared interests.*

Bring up subjects and ask questions that will reveal what you have in common. Perhaps you have a passion for baseball but never thought to bring that up with your blind colleague. You figured, after all, that because he can't see or play the game, he wouldn't be interested. If you talk about it, you might just discover that his favorite pastime is listening to games and that his knowledge of baseball statistics would put yours to shame. You'll never know until you have the conversation.

A third practice to keep in mind when reaching out is to...

*Care about and notice what you have in common.*

You'll know what I mean by "care about" if you recall the last time you were in the market for a new car. Maybe one criterion you had for the model you chose was that it be fairly unusual—that you don't often see it on the road. The snag in this criterion is that you may not see many of them before you decide on the model, but once you make the decision, they (much to your dismay) appear to be everywhere!

You wonder, *Where did all those cars suddenly come from?* In fact, it's not the number of automobiles that has changed but rather your attitude. Once you began to care about that model, it became forefront in your thinking and no longer blended in with every other vehicle on the freeway. These heightened observation skills happen because of a fundamental truth of how the mind works: we notice what we care about.

Just like with that particular model of car, if we care about the common ground that all human beings share, we will begin to notice shared values, interests, needs, and concerns in every relationship we cultivate. You'll be amazed at what you begin to see.

***Antibias Activity: The Three/Two/One Process***

The Three/Two/One Process facilitates the identification of what we have in common with people whom we normally think of as very different from us. It consists of the following steps:

**Step #1:** Make contact with **three** people whom you do not know well and whom you believe to have different values and interests from your own.

**Step #2:** Talk to each of those people about **two** subjects that you might, in the past, have felt would not interest them.

**Step #3:** On the basis of the commonalities you discover, identify **one** of these people as someone you might like to get to know better.

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