

Get Familiar With Your Biases

We all have biases. Some of them are implicit – meaning they are unconscious and we are largely unaware of them – while some are explicit and conscious. Biases can often be particularly strong in stressful situations, which are unfortunately one of the worst times to deal with them. It is far better to have assessed our internal landscape prior to hard times.

The first step is acknowledging and getting familiar with your biases. This comes before stopping a particular train of thought or taking positive steps such as getting more information, stepping forward, and making changes.

When your biases present themselves, don't push them away. And please don't say what I have heard some people claim: "I know this is biased, but I can't help how I feel" or "Well, if it's unconscious, what can I do about it?" Our biases came from somewhere – from years of living in a society that has struggled to rid itself of the designations that some groups are seen as better than others. To move diversity forward, we must first become familiar with our biases and use our explicit good beliefs to work hard to counter them. If we don't, the social scientists tell us that our implicit thoughts, not our explicit ones, will be the most accurate predictors of our actual behavior.

Tips for Practicing This Culturally Effective Habit: Get Familiar with Your Biases

- 1. Realize that having biases isn't about being a good or a bad person – it's about being human.** In addition, many biases are unconscious and implicit, rather than conscious and explicit, so you might have to work extra hard to uncover them.
- 2. Notice when and where your biases pop up.** Biases are often triggered by stressful situations or instances in which you are not in control. You can actually use these opportunities to become familiar with your implicit biases.

- 3. Don't be surprised if you have biases against your own group.** We are all breathing in the smog of the “isms” (racism, sexism, classism, etc.) and they get reinforced in the most subtle ways every day. Even when we have personal experience and information to negate them, the beliefs behind the “isms” are hard to remove from our thoughts and actions.

- 4. Remind yourself of what you really believe and value – pay attention to what is true instead of what you fear based on your stereotypes and biases.** After you make a new (and possibly unwanted) discovery about yourself, you will always have the opportunity to substitute new behaviors that are fair, and act to minimize your bias.

- 5. It might also help to review some of the recent decisions you have made:**
Whom have you hired? Whom did you sell your house to? Whom did you choose to sit beside on the train? How did you react to your child's new friend? How did you choose your doctor when you joined your new medical insurance carrier? Did these individuals conform to any biases you might be carrying? Did you have a moment where you became aware that they contradicted your biases? When you were reviewing that resumé and you saw information possibly indicating the candidate's political affiliation, what thoughts came next? At that moment, did you move towards inclusion or exclusion? Did you work hard to focus on job-related criteria, or did you form an opinion about the candidate's job fit through the lens of your political affiliation? What do you want to do differently the next time?

- 6. Test yourself by taking the Implicit Association Test (IAT),** developed by scientists to measure biases in several different categories. Each test only takes about ten minutes. The IAT can be sobering but illuminating.
<http://www.implicit.harvard.edu>.