

Dealing with unconscious bias



By: Dr. Linda J. Burrs

Here's a sad truth ... the work of dealing with conscious and unconscious bias is scary. It is scary because we are fearful of what our deep down thinking and behaviors, especially when no one is watching, says about us for real. To get into the space of genuine acceptance of multiculturalism will require us to take a LONG and HARD look inside our selves....and very few of us are ready or willing or even able to do this

Here's the challenge: Our beliefs and perceptions are NOT always obvious or conscious to us. These unconscious assumptions, biases, and prejudices can undermine our best intent to work toward an inclusive work environment.

In order to understand conscious and unconscious bias, it is important to understand what the brain does when we meet someone who is different. The brain naturally sorts the people we meet into recognizable groups.

So...we put people into "buckets". People with big gold chains, *do-rags* and baggy clothes go into a bucket labeled **dangerous**. People with expensive cars go into a bucket. People who may not speak English very well or very clearly go into a bucket.

Depending on what bucket a person gets dumped in, determines how they get treated and how we interact with them based on what we believe about that group of individuals.

Unconscious bias is more about interpretation based on repeated conditioning. Remember ... we are all in one bucket or another. Once the seed of racial bias is planted and the message (seed) germinates and starts to grow ... most people do not remember where these hidden biases originated. So how do we deal with these unconscious biases?

- ◆ Stop fibbing to yourself. Ask yourselves the hard questions (i.e., why do I believe what I believe about a group of people?)
- ◆ What hidden patterns or biases are you bringing to the workplace every day? How might these hidden biases be manifesting themselves in how I interact with or make decisions about others?

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When we are seriously looking for diamonds, we learn about the 4 C's of diamonds. In order to know what kind of diamond you are looking for, you have to know something about diamonds - color, cut, clarity and carat. In order to learn how to deal with unconscious biases, there are also 4 C's to consider. These strategies include knowing what type of thinking you are engaged in at the time you encounter someone who is different from you. The 4 C's of unconscious bias are check, challenge, commit and change.

Strategies for dealing with conscious and unconscious bias
<p>Check: <i>your assumptions, values and beliefs by asking yourself these questions:</i> What do I believe about other groups of people? Do I consider my views and opinions as better than or more responsible than those who are different from me?</p>
<p>Challenge: the results of your check: why is this true of this group of people? Is this belief still relevant? Would I have said, behaved or questioned someone of my own culture or would I have let them "slide"? Why do I react the way I do when ...?</p>
<p>Commit: to behaving and responding differently – you are not going to accomplish anything by staying in the space you are in now</p>
<p>Change: we cannot change what we cannot acknowledge. Once you can acknowledge you have a problem ... you can then change your behaviors and ultimately your attitudes about others.</p>

These four steps take us into our internal mental model to explore our inner thoughts (and some of us won't like what we see) about ourselves and why we react and behave as we do. Once you make the commitment to change, make your change consistent and persistent with the new or updated mental model you are attempting to solidify. Keep in mind ... there will be challenges to stay where you are: family, friends, co-workers, media and a plethora of influences ... deal with the complexity and stay the course.

Other questions you should consider asking yourself:

- ◆ Do I value other's opinions or views?
- ◆ Do I make assumptions about what someone is or is not capable of doing or accomplishing simply based on how they look?
- ◆ Who do I see as capable of being as successful as I believe I am? Do they look like me?
- ◆ Are I stuck trying NOT to be biased? If so, what is in my way?
- ◆ Do I criticize others for doing the same things I allow those who look like me to do?

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- ◆ Do I have double standards in behaviors or work habits?
- ◆ Do I assume if someone who is different doesn't do it the way I would, it is wrong?
- ◆ Are my perceptions of my work superior to others who are different in some way?

When we figure out that none of us are as strong as all of us, we will be able to lay aside our intended and unintended (conscious and unconscious) biases. Until then, we are just getting by ... we are not really working toward a multicultural existence where everyone is encouraged to do and be their very best.

Your thoughts and comments are appreciated.

For more information on **ways to effectively deal with unconscious biases**, call me at (937) 866-7511 or email me at Linda@DrBurrs.com.

About the author: Dr. Linda Burrs is the CEO and Principal Consultant of the *Step Up to Success!* consulting firm that focuses on leadership and inclusion strategies. For more than 25 years, Dr. Burrs has brought her rich dynamic approach to the corporate and professional training arena. The breadth of her experience crosses all walks of social and organizational life including law firms, technology organizations, educators, business professionals, leadership groups and non-profit groups.

Dr. Burrs is the author of the book: *The Fruits of Inclusion™: A Smart Business Guide to Creating a Sustainable Diversity and Inclusion Program*. She is also the designer of the *Second Generation Diversity Training™* program series. Dr. Burrs is an often sought after public speaker and presenter for her deep expertise and engaging programs.

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