



## Forging Shared “Kinship Groups”: How to Defeat Bias in Your Workplace

*Sondra Thiederman, Ph.D.*

When I use the phrase “kinship group,” your mind probably jumps to blood relations or, at least, clusters of people who are bound together by some historical or cultural tie. If you thought the latter, you are not quite there, but you are on the right track. A kinship group, as I am using it here, 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, culture, ethnicity, age, or any other of dozens of human dimensions.

### **The Value of Kinship Groups for Reducing Bias**

The virtue in the concept of a kinship group is that it allows each of us to belong to many groups at once, depending on the characteristic on which we focus. It also—and this is the best part—enables us to broaden our group to include many populations that we previously thought of as different from ourselves.

This multiplying and broadening of kinship groups, in turn, brings us to another advantage:

*Once you identify yourself with a particular population, members of that group are transformed in your mind from “them” to “us.”*

An Asian-American might, for example, initially see her Latino colleague only in terms of how different he is from her: Latino, 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; 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 is gifted with several categories—several kinship groups—that they in fact share. Were she to shift her thoughts about him from an emphasis on Latino 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 bias-healing process can begin.

I am glad to report that this shifting of kinship groups is one of the easiest things the rational mind can do. Researchers, including psychologist Robert Kurzban formerly of the University of Santa Barbara, know that we are compelled to categorize, but just what those categories are is largely up to us.

This is very good news for the cause of bias reduction because, when we shift people from “them” to “us,” a couple of positive things immediately happen.

The first is based on the fact that human beings tend to see members of other groups as all alike; in essence, we make inflexible generalities (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.

The second thing that this conversion from “them” to “us” accomplishes also has to do with how we perceive people. When we think of others as different from ourselves—as members of another kinship group—we tend to amplify the characteristic that makes them different (skin color, disability, gender, age, etc.). Because that difference is amplified, we notice it first. In turn, because we notice it first, we use that difference as a rubric by which we classify the entire group.

This process gets reversed, however, once we begin to identify that “different” person as one of us. At that point, we focus on what we share and the initial rubric of classification (the thing that made him different) gradually shrinks back to its proper proportion. That difference becomes, at that point, merely one of many characteristics by which we distinguish our new fellow kinship group member.

### **How Organizations Can Encourage the Forming of Kinship Groups**

Organizations can play a major role in facilitating bias reduction by creating ways for people of diverse backgrounds to be together and, in turn, have the opportunity to discover and focus on shared kinship groups. This contact, in

order to be most effective at reducing bias, needs to have the following characteristics:

1. Be appropriately intimate
2. Be sanctioned by a relevant authority figure
3. Be among people who are reasonably equal in status and resources
4. Be goal oriented

Affinity/network/employee resource groups certainly conform to these requirements and have long been the backbone of diversity efforts in many companies. Ever since they were first conceived in the late 1970s, affinity 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, included 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 affinity groups 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; or heterosexuals as different from homosexuals), 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. No matter what its nature, that shared interest is a kinship group that brings people who are otherwise different together.

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)
- Dads at Microsoft (Microsoft)
- Family Caregivers Network (Kimberly-Clark)
- FlexImpact [for employees working flextime] (Microsoft)
- Junior Exempt Employee Forum (Booz Allen Hamilton)
- Attention Deficit Disorder (Microsoft)

Affinity groups are, however, not the only way organizations can orchestrate the creation of kinship groups. Any kind of club, volunteer program, or social event at which people mix will do the job. Northrop Grumman, for example, has numerous clubs, many of which meet during the noon hour to organize their free-time activities. Just a few of these are Cigar aficionados, the Culinary Club,

Four Wheelers, Karaoke, Scrap booking, and Vintage Aircraft Boosters. Amgen, a leader in human therapeutics and biotechnology, is another club-conscious organization, in that it encourages the formation of kinship groups such as Toastmasters, soccer teams, a bicycle club, an orchestra, and even a salsa band, complete with dancers. Medical technology manufacturer Gen-Probe emphasizes bringing employees together around physical activities such as aerobics classes, sand volleyball games, and yoga instruction.

Bank of America bridges the distinction between clubs and volunteer efforts by sending its Bank of America Singers into retirement homes to entertain the residents. 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 common goal.

The Xerox Leadership Association is a good example of this kinship-producing formula, in that it is composed of diverse people who arrange for charitable activities at which Xerox employees of all backgrounds can mix. Macy's Partners in Time program is impressive for the number of people who participate. Every year it brings together 67,000 employees, families, and friends to volunteer in various programs throughout the country. Not to be outdone, Key Bank of Oregon 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 do services such as cleaning gutters for the elderly.

Whether it be through the formation of affinity groups, social clubs, or volunteer efforts, the options for bringing diverse team members together are limited only by your imagination, your resources, and your corporate goals.

Sondra Thiederman is a speaker and author on diversity, bias-reduction, and cross-cultural issues. The material in this article was adapted with permission from her book *Making Diversity Work: Seven Steps for Defeating Bias in the Workplace* (Chicago: Dearborn Press, 2003).

She can be contacted at: [STPhD@Thiederman.com](mailto:STPhD@Thiederman.com) or visit her web site at [www.Thiederman.com](http://www.Thiederman.com).