

## **"The Vision Renewal Process: How to Achieve Bias-Free Leadership"**

*By Sondra Thiederman, Ph.D.*

·Henry didn't want to hurt Linda's feelings so, when faced with the necessity of critiquing her inadequate report, he pulled his punches and let some of her most glaring errors slide.

·Susie thinks of herself as someone who genuinely values diversity. Recently she made a diversity decision of which she was particularly proud. When she learned that some of her Native American staff had a more casual view of time, she, in an effort to honor their culture, arranged for them to arrive at work 30 minutes later than the rest of the team.

·Betty, an experienced manager, knew what it felt like to be discriminated against in the workplace and was determined not to do it to anyone else. As a result, when she learned that Joe, an applicant for a new staff position, was in a wheelchair, she was determined, despite his weak qualifications, to give him a break.

Does any of this sound familiar? Don't most of us, like Henry, Susie, and Betty, like to think of ourselves as nice people who go out of our way to value diversity, avoid hurt feelings, and give people a break. Surely, we could never be accused of blatant racism, sexism or any other "ism" for that matter and, heaven forbid, we certainly have no biases, at least none that would affect our work.

It is safe to say that most of us indeed are "nice people" and, further, that we probably are in pretty good shape when it comes to being free of the kinds of blatant prejudices that could open us up to charges of discrimination. That good news, however, does not mean that we – nor Henry, Susie, and Betty – are bias-free. The fact is that too many leaders today are afflicted with a kind of bias that is almost impossible to spot; I call that bias "Guerilla Bias™."

I have chosen this name because, like the "guerilla warrior" who hides within stands of lush foliage, Guerilla Bias is concealed behind good intentions, kind words, and apparently thoughtful acts. This distorted attitude becomes even more ominous when we realize that, not only is the person with the bias blissfully unaware that it exists, often the target of the belief is equally lulled into believing that all is well.

Despite its innocuous disguise, or maybe because of it, Guerilla Bias can be particularly destructive to our ability to lead effectively. Most of this destruction grows from the fact that Guerilla Bias is based on the perverse premise that all women, emerging groups (previously called “minorities”), people with disabilities, and those who are outside the so-called "majority" population are to some degree fragile, quick to explode, or in need of special treatment. This attitude, as you can well imagine, costs the workplace much in terms of lost productive, wasted time, and expensive turn-over.

### **The Price of Guerilla Bias**

Manifested in behaviors ranging from a reluctance to coach a black employee for fear of appearing racist to excessive accommodation of cultural differences during key negotiations, Guerilla Bias has done more to distort our leadership decisions than many more diagnosable and, therefore, eradicable strains of the disease.

Guerilla Bias can cost your organization valuable employees. Linda, for example, like many before her, finally realized that Henry was never going to give her the information she needed to do a better job and eventually quit to work for a competitive company.

Guerilla Bias can interfere with open communication. We all know that without good communication, all the leadership wisdom in the world is wasted. Tragically, this loss has become all-too-common in a workplace riddled with the fear of being politically incorrect. I am reminded, for example, of a black woman who was in charge of the diversity efforts for her company. Because so many of her team were Guerilla Biased and, therefore, perpetually afraid they would offend her, they refused to reveal the very real challenges being faced by her organization. The result was a stifled diversity effort and a workplace in which communication continues to this day to be hamstrung by the belief that people different from ourselves need to be handled with kid gloves.

Guerilla Bias can damage your own reputation. Joe, the new hire in the wheelchair, you see, failed miserably. He failed, not because he was in a wheelchair, but because he simply wasn't qualified for the job. Eventually, he was fired and Betty's superiors became very unhappy with her apparent poor judgment.

Guerilla Bias can damage teams and create unnecessary tension. The case of Susie sighted above is based on a conversation I had with a woman following a workshop in southern California. During our conversation, it became clear that this woman was utterly confused about how to handle what seemed to be a straight-forward management challenge. Her confusion surprised me because she had appeared so bright and experienced during the program. I was surprised, that is, until I realized that she was allowing her own personal brand of Guerilla Bias to cloud her judgment. The conversation went something like this:

I just don't know what to do. I have several Native American employees who are late to work every day. I know they all have reliable transportation so there's really no practical reason for them to be so lax. After doing some research, I found out that their culture's view of time is very different from mine so I decided to give them some leeway and let them come in later than everybody else. Now my problem is that the other employees are complaining and want the same flexibility. In my industry, that just isn't going to work. What do I do now?

My response to this woman was a simple, “Why?” “Why would you allow the Native Americans to come in late when everybody else isn’t granted the same privilege?” Her answer was to repeat the fact that maybe there was a cultural reason why they couldn’t grasp the notion of punctuality. After talking with her a while, it became clear that cultural differences were not the problem, her bias was. She was another nice person guilty of the Guerilla Bias that emerging group members have needs so special that they have to be given unique privilege. In this case, that attitude had three negative consequences for her efforts to build harmonious teams:

1. It demeaned the Native Americans by implying that they were unable to measure up to the same standard as the others.
2. It diminished productivity by throwing off the early morning work schedule.
3. It created tension among the team and, according to her, caused the non-Native Americans to look down on their colleagues.

The sad thing about these three losses is that they never would have happened had this manager kept her bias in check and held all her employees to the same rules of punctuality.

### **The Vision Renewal Process**

In light of the havoc that biases can wreak, it is fortunate that there is something we can do about them. We are not, after all, born biased. There is no genetic predisposition to bias, no bias gene rides on our chromosomes, there is no DNA test that can identify who is biased and who is not. Bias is learned. It is an acquired habit of thought rooted in fear and fueled by conditioning and, as such, can be unacquired and deconditioned.

The following seven step Vision Renewal Process (VRP) is based on this principle of bias as a habit. By moving through these steps, we gain the knowledge and motivation necessary to shove our biases aside and begin to see the people around us more accurately.

**Step I. Become mindful of your biases.** All biases, even the most sub-conscious ones, periodically toss up a clue to their presence in the form of a thought. These thoughts are the knee-jerk assumptions that arise when encountering someone different from ourselves. Your task is to make a mental note of this thought, an assumption that just might be a whiff of smoke drifting up from an as yet un-identified bias. Once your bias is identified, you can proceed with the process of eliminating it from your thinking and from your decision-making process.

**Step II. Access the alleged benefits of your biases.** Although biases are destructive, one reason we cling to them is that they do contain what psychologists call “secondary gains.” In order to move forward with the VRP, we need to identify those alleged benefits and weigh them against the damage that biases can wreak. Once this is done, we will have a good idea of which biases to attack first. Your task in this step is to figure out the secondary gains that accompany the biases you identified in Step I. To help you do this, here are the alleged benefits that most often accompany bias:

1. Relief of guilt. If we believe a negative generality about a group, it makes us feel less bad about treating that group with disrespect.
2. Protection of status. Negative biases give us the false impression that we are superior to others.
3. The illusion of being a “good person.” Guerilla Biases in particular make us feel like

we are thoughtful, kind, and sensitive to the needs of others.

4. The illusion of the ability to predict the behaviors and attitudes of people based solely on the group to which they belong.

**Step III. Identify which biases are doing the most harm.**

Just as battlefield medics put injured soldiers through triage to establish who needs treatment first, we need to examine our biases to identify which ones most urgently require attention. This is done by balancing the alleged benefits you explored in Step II against the destruction your bias is apt to bring to the workplace. Take a look at “The Price of Guerilla Bias” section above for examples of some of the ways in which bias is destructive. Do any of them apply to you?

**Step IV: Dissect your bias:** Now that you have seen how destructive biases can be, the next step is to examine the logic on which they are based. This process will reveal their weak foundation and increase your ability to shove these distorted assumptions aside when they come to mind. The most important part of this dissection process is to ask yourself this question: Was the original source of my bias reliable?

In most cases, the answer will be “no.” You might, for example, discover that your bias grew from the repeated messages of a frightened parent, from rumor, or from a media that loves to distort the truth. Perhaps your distorted thinking was triggered by one or more bad experiences with the group in question. Although experience has its virtues, when it comes to the formation of bias, you will be surprised at how unreliable it can be. This is because what experience teaches us about an individual or a group can be grossly distorted by the presence of intense emotion, the trickery of self-fulfilling prophecy, or the filter of expectation.

**Step V: Identify Common Kinship Groups:** This step consists of redefining our kinship groups so they include those toward whom we hold a bias. A “kinship group” is any population that shares a self- or externally-ascribed category that sets it apart from others. This characteristic might be a disability, race, gender, age or any other of dozens of human dimensions.

The virtue in the concept of 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 broadening of our kinship group essentially re-classifies people from “them” to “us.” When this happens, bias is reduced because numerous studies have shown that human beings automatically treat those whom we think of as “like us” more fairly.

There are many ways to create these common kinship groups; here are just a few:

1. Identify common goals.
2. Identify common values.
3. Work to identify shared emotions and experience.

This latter approach is the most important as it creates feelings of empathy that automatically minimize a biased attitude.

**Step VI: Shove Your Biases Aside:** Once we have laid the proper foundation, shoving biases aside when they come to mind becomes a mechanical act of habit and will. This is fortunate because the benefits of Step VI go far beyond the ability to see one individual on one occasion clearly. Bias-free vision has a cumulative effect. Because it allows us to see people accurately, we suddenly find ourselves meeting more and more individuals who do not conform to our bias. As experiences of seeing people as they really are accumulate, the balance between past biases and real life begins to tip in favor of accuracy and the bias begins to fade.

**Step VII: Beware the Bias Revival:** Biases, like all unhealthy attitudes, have a perverse way of lying in wait for an opportunity to re-exert their influence on our lives. They might, for example, reappear when we meet someone who conforms to our bias or when a negative event occurs that involves the group in question. When you observe a bias returning, try this:

1. Remind yourself that any one incident applies only to the specific individuals involved.
2. Go back through other experiences with the group and see how many people you have encountered who do not conform to your bias.
3. Return to Step IV and run the bias through the dissection processes one more time.

### **Final Thoughts**

Those who argue that biases can't be fixed say that they are an intrinsic part of "human nature" (whatever that is) and, therefore, impossible to eradicate. Every time I hear the phrase "human nature" or "We're only human," my hackles go up. To say that an attitude is "only human" implies that to be human is to be incapable of change; it connotes that there's not a darn thing we can do to improve ourselves or our attitudes. I am more optimistic than that. I believe that through awareness, knowledge, and plain old-fashioned effort, we can, at the very least, reduce our biases to the point where they have a minimal influence on our lives and work. We are, in short, more-than-capable of acquiring the skills of bias-free leadership.

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