

Chapter 7

Shifting to Neutral

How We Can Learn to Disengage from Bias

Until you make the unconscious conscious it will direct your life and you will call it fate. We cannot change anything until we accept it. Condemnation does not liberate, it oppresses! —Carl Jung

If you notice anything, it leads you to notice more and more.
—Mary Oliver (award-winning American poet)

If you think in any way like I do, all of this research I've cited thus far might seem pretty mind-blowing. As I've read through hundreds of the studies, some of which I have mentioned in this book, I'm often left with a feeling that I can't trust anything I'm seeing in the world around me. To paraphrase the words of one of my firm's clients, I realize that I should no longer believe what I think!

Witty as his statement might be, there is some real truth to it. As the mathematician and philosopher René Descartes famously said (in Latin), "cogito ergo sum" or "I think, therefore I am." For the most part, all of us identify strongly with our thoughts. The notion that our thoughts and feelings may not be "true," but rather are automatically programmed in our minds through our various experiences, and influenced by some of the mental incongruities that I've been discussing, is hard for us to grasp. It is, first of all, hard for us to see the mind in action with any kind of objectivity because we are looking *through* the very mind we are trying to look *at*! We have complicated thinking patterns that are designed to self-justify the very things we are trying to explore. Yet, the question we have to ask is: Can we trust our own perceptions?

It is disquieting to think we cannot trust our own perceptions. Most human beings tend to gravitate toward certainty. It is reassuring to know that the world is as we think it is, and it can be very uncomfortable to accept that things we are not even aware of can influence our thoughts. This is one of the reasons we can feel a sense of insecurity when we realize that we have been manipulated. And yet, lo and behold, all of us are being manipulated all of the time.

Advertising campaigns pull on our emotions by priming our mind with thoughts and images, by using different sounds or colors to make an impact upon our behavior. Political campaigns on both sides of the political spectrum can greatly influence voters by projecting images that call up visceral reactions. In the 1964 presidential campaign, many people were outraged by an advertisement Lyndon Johnson ran against his opponent, Barry Goldwater, which showed a young girl picking at a daisy, followed by an exploding atomic bomb. The message was clearly meant to infer that Goldwater was a warmonger. And in 1988, George H. W. Bush's campaign was accused of dirty tricks when it ran a campaign ad featuring a sinister picture of one Willie Horton, a convict who had committed violent crimes after being released on a prison furlough program supported by Bush's opponent, Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis. However, despite the uproar both ads caused, they also were found to have made an enormous impact on the way voters saw the candidates.

Therefore, the question we must ask is this: Is there anything we can do about our unconscious biases? Or, are we destined to simply wander blindly through our lives, biases alive, intact, and operational? What it comes down to is this: Can unconscious bias be eliminated?

The answer is not a simple one, and is not without controversy.

Many researchers have long believed that because unconscious or implicit biases develop at very early stages in our lives, and through influences that we are not usually aware of, they may be virtually impossible to change. However, recent research, and knowledge gained from my own experience in working with thousands of people in many different types of organizations and in many different parts of the world, suggest that while it may be difficult to eliminate our biases, we may be able to become aware of some of our biases. We may be able to reframe them, or at least curb their influence on our behavior.

Sometimes, dealing more effectively with unconscious bias involves something as simple as just noticing the bias. One morning I was standing in the kitchen getting ready to leave for work when my wife simply asked me to take out the trash. Now, to be clear, I have no conscious objection to emptying the trash. And yet, at that particular moment, I became annoyed. But in the midst of my annoyance, something interesting happened. As I was tying up the bag, I had a proverbial "aha" moment. My annoyance paused, and I found myself asking myself why I was annoyed by having to take out the trash. On the surface this is, of course, not a profound thought. However, and this is probably because I have spent so much time thinking about the way the mind works, I realized I had moved from my gut emotional reaction to a more thoughtful contemplation. In essence, I had moved from fast brain to slow brain thinking. Why was this simple task eliciting this response? In the next moment I saw it. When I was a little boy, probably seven years old, I used to get into righteous battles with my mom over taking out the trash. And at that moment, in my projection, my wife had become my mother! I chuckled to myself when I noticed it, but more importantly, my whole mood changed. For at least one moment, I was free of the automaticity of my mind. I had confronted my bias.

I don't tell that story to present myself as some paragon of consciousness, but just as a simple example of how our minds can become "liberated" by the awareness of our automaticity.

What happened to me at the moment the resentment occurred was an example of regression. There are times when something triggers a past memory and the feelings associated with that memory. Sometimes it is relatively innocent, as in the case of my reaction to a simple request to take out the trash. Other times, if something triggers a memory of a trauma, the reactions can be much more intense. When we regress to a previous incident like my trash memory, our emotional reactions are often similar to those that we had at the age we were when the original incident happens.

Noticing when we regress in this fashion can be a helpful way to identify the times when we are not reacting to the present moment, but rather are surfacing a patterned reaction or bias of some kind or another. If we pay attention, we can sense that we are reacting from an earlier emotional place. Even if we cannot recall an incident, or know what we are triggering, the very fact of sensing that we are reacting to something from the past can help us "dis-identify" with the reaction and create some freedom to choose a different behavior. By dis-identify, I simply mean that we see the reaction *as a reaction* and not as "the truth"!

We will never be free of all biases. As I've said a number of times, bias is as natural to the human condition as breathing. What we can do to deal with bias is somewhat similar to what we do in a car. We can step on the clutch and shift into neutral. When you step on the clutch, the engine doesn't stop running, but for that moment at least, the engine is not driving the car. The same is true when we bring our awareness to our bias. The bias may still be there, but at that moment we have some ability to manage how much it controls our behavior.

And while we are a culture that moves quickly to "doing," it is important to recognize the importance of being" and awareness as a source of transformation. In the introduction I mentioned a study that was conducted by Justin Wolfers and Joseph Price that revealed bias among NBA referees. In February 2014 the authors of the original study, along with Devin Pope, from the Booth School of Business at the University of Chicago, found that simply being aware of the issue, even without any conscious action, had created significant change. The authors found that the bias continued during the three years after the initial study, but that after the study received widespread media attention in 2007 the bias virtually disappeared. While the NBA reported no specific actions taken (e.g., no discussions or changes in training or incentives for referees) the awareness and attention to the issue appear to have been enough to create significant change. Simply having it in their span of attention appears to have changed the referees' behavior.

So what we need to ask is whether we can develop practices that can help us more regularly free the mind in that way. I believe we can do so, and I am seeing such behavior occur in countless incidents with people in our workshops and throughout our client organizations. Human beings have an enormous capability for neuroplasticity, which is the capacity of the brain to form new neural connections that allow it to reorganize itself throughout our lives. In some cases, neuroplasticity happens because of disease or injury, when a different part of the brain takes over for the part that has ceased to function. And it also can happen because of a new awareness, new experiences, new norms that develop in our cultures. It can also happen when we develop a new narrative that offers a more positive interpretation of the circumstance that we are confronting. It turns out that the old expression of "you can't teach an old dog new tricks" (which is not true with regard to dogs), also

doesn't apply to people.

Neuroplasticity can take place among individuals and can make its presence felt throughout organizations. Consider the cultural dialogue about the rights of gay and lesbian couples to marry. In 2004, the *Washington Post* and ABC News conducted a poll as to whether it should be legal or illegal for gay and lesbian people to marry. The results were strongly anti-marriage equality. A total of 62 percent of the respondents said they thought gay and lesbian marriage should be illegal. Only 32 percent felt it should be legal. In 2013, when the same organizations asked the same question in a new poll, the numbers had practically reversed. In that poll, 58 percent supported marriage equality and only 36 percent opposed it, accounting for a 26 percent shift in only nine years!^[1]

Any number of factors likely contributed to this overwhelming change in attitude. Still, the important point is that our collective "neural pathways" about marriage equality seem to have been rewired in very short order.

It is challenging to know what standard we use for measuring changes in our unconscious biases. There are some testing mechanisms which have been very effective in giving us feedback as to our positive or negative implicit responses to certain groups. But, as I'll discuss later in this chapter, even they are not without challenge. Anecdotal stories of change are not definitive either, because though they can be powerful and emotionally moving, they are often interpreted through the lens of the very mind possessing open or hidden bias.

The results that people produce are an important metric for sure, but results can be influenced by so many variables that they are hard to attribute to any single behavioral change. They also must be measured over an extended period of time to ensure sustainability.

Even behavior change is not a dependable gauge for determining

true transformational change. Think about it. How many areas of your life can you name in which you know exactly what you are supposed to do, and may even go through the motions of changing, but don't deeply embrace the change that is needed? I discussed a personal example earlier in the book when I talked about the fact that I have struggled with my weight for most of my life. I have gained and lost hundreds of pounds. But even when I was heavy, I knew everything there was to know about dieting. It's not that complicated: you eat less and exercise more! I can't tell you how many times I started and stopped, until I realized that the key was not so much knowing what to do, but rather *becoming conscious about why I eat*. It wasn't until I experienced that shift in my way of *being* about eating that I have been able to sustain a healthy diet for an extended time.

I believe we must look at some combination of all of these things (attitude, behavior, and results) to truly create transformation. We have to make sure that people get the information they need to understand what they are dealing with, and then define a clear set of behaviors that can help move us in that direction. We also have to shift our mind-set about how we feel about bias and difference at a fundamental level. We must approach it with a clear awareness of the emotional impact it is making upon us. In my experience, that combination creates the possibility of true transformational change.

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I have known since my middle school science fair project that, like both my parents, I was destined to be a scientist. There was never a hesitation or question that, as a woman, I was equally

qualified to go into this field. I double-majored in biology and psychology, completed a Ph.D. in clinical psychology, and now I'm an associate professor of psychiatry. I have wonderful, accomplished female colleagues and collaborators who inspire me daily. So, when I took the Implicit Association Test, imagine my dismay when the pattern of my responses indicated that I had a moderate preference for associating women with humanities and men with science! How could this be?

Later, I learned that women often have stronger anti-women implicit biases than men, and that women scientists are just as likely to under-rate women applicants as men who run science labs. Yet, I still felt dismay that cultural messages contrary to my own identity could be so ingrained in my psyche. I have tried to discover ways in which my own unconscious bias may be influencing my actions and the way I treat the women that I train. At faculty meetings, I now make a point of always taking a seat at the main table, and sometimes I'm the only woman at the table. Before I start to read applications or grants, I bring to mind all the women scientists I admire. When I write letters of recommendation for women trainees, I substitute the name of a male trainee and pay attention to my use of strong adjectives that emphasize competence as opposed to niceness. I try to be a role model to more junior women by embracing a feminine style of relating to others and by not hiding the rewards and challenges of being both a mom and an academic. It's a work in progress, but I feel like I'm at least taking some steps to defy the imprint of society's expectations as I pursue work in the field that I love.

Of course, any movement toward working on identifying and navigating our unconscious biases begins with motivation. We have to see that there is some greater purpose in being more thoughtful

and less judgmental, and in learning to not let our automatic assumptions and stereotypes run our lives. This may be easier said than done for some people. This is particularly true when we are part of the dominant group. When we are in the dominant group, we may not be aware of how much our biases affect those within nondominant groups. And, since the biases that we are dealing with generally, at least in the short term, seem to benefit us, our motivation for change can be limited.

Hidden prejudices and biases are surprisingly influential underpinnings to all the decisions we make, affecting our feelings and, consequently, our actions. And there are times when not recognizing this influence on our choices and decision making can do great harm.

Ultimately, there are two major motivators for learning to navigate our unconscious biases. The first comes from a commitment to engaging in healthy interactions between people, equity in our communities and organizations, and justice in society. These are noble reasons and they seem valuable enough to most anyone. But even if you are not inspired by those reasons, it just makes sense for us to make more conscious decisions so we don't hire somebody because he reminds us of a kid we played ball with in fourth grade, or spend more for a car because the salesperson is of a certain race, or buy a bottle of wine simply because of the music that is playing in the background in the store. Making decisions in that way will not only harm others, but doing so also makes us very poor decision makers. And in making such decisions, we will suffer the consequences (which can range from mildly annoying to extremely serious) by hiring the wrong people or buying the wrong product.

At the basic core, it is important for people to have some information or education regarding the topics I've been discussing thus far in this book. Understanding how much the unconscious

mind influences us and the basic concepts of how we think opens us to the possibility that there may be things going on that are unknown to us. That doesn't mean that people have to become psychologists or neuroscientists. However, knowing not to believe everything you think is a good start toward managing bias. This is where participating in some kind of unconscious bias education can be helpful.

Social psychologists Gordon Moskowitz of Lehigh University and Jeff Stone from the University of Arizona study the impact of bias on medical decision making, an issue that contributes greatly to the continuing patterns of health disparities that negatively affect African Americans and other blacks, as well as Latinos, Native Americans, women, and LGBT people. "Workshops or other learning modules that help medical professionals learn about non-conscious processes can provide them with skills that reduce bias when they interact with minority group patients," said Moskowitz and Stone. "Examples of such skills in action include automatically activating egalitarian goals, looking for common identities and counter-stereotypical information, and taking the perspective of the minority group patient."^[2]

Once we are aware of the dynamics of unconscious bias, we can begin to engage in some practices that seem to make a difference. After decades of work in this area, I have come to believe that there are six major areas of focus that can help us work on our individual patterns of bias. They are:

1. Recognize that bias is a normal part of the human experience.

This first area is by the far the most important. You have bias, yes you do, and so do I. We can't run away from it. Denying we possess it only gives it a greater chance to affect us. As a matter of fact, we can't live without it. Bias is part of our fundamental survival

mechanism. All human beings have bias. If we understand that concept, it allows us to bring compassion to others and to ourselves. It means that we need to discard the historic "good person/bad person" paradigm of diversity work and recognize the humanity in us.

If you would like to briefly examine this phenomenon within yourself, take a moment to do this quick exercise. Don't worry about being politically correct in your responses, because nobody will see the answers but you. Take out a piece of paper and write down a list of different identity groups that come to mind (e.g., white people, black people, Latinos, Asians, gays, lesbians, transgender, teenagers, elderly, baby boomers, attorneys, doctors) Make the list as long as you like.

Once you have drawn up the list, look at each item and honestly consider how you feel about people in this group. Look for both biases toward people in the group, and biases against people in the group. Just notice the biases. Check both your thoughts and the emotional feelings. Who do you feel more or less comfortable around? Sometimes it is helpful to look at pictures as well. Obviously, the things we notice will be on a conscious level, but because we are not always present to them, the things we notice often occur as unconscious motivators.

It also is important for us to remember that some groups of people have definitely suffered a great deal more at a societal level because of the institutionalized systems of bias that have negatively affected groups such as people of color, women, LGBT people, people with disabilities, and the like. At the same time, such realization does not stop each of us from having issues we must face and work on. I am Jewish, and I know Jews who rail against anti-Semitism but then make questionable comments about race. I know African Americans who rail against racism but then make questionable comments about

sexual orientation. I know LGBT folks who hate homophobia but have questionable attitudes about immigrants.

Do you know anybody who doesn't have some reaction to somebody? If you're honest in your answer, you'll know that everyone has some reaction to everyone else.

When we believe that having bias makes us a bad person, our minds move either to self-recrimination, denial, or self-justification, none of which moves us closer to being fully present to those with whom we interact. Guilt is a pretty dysfunctional emotion. It causes contraction and separation. Think about it. When somebody makes you feel guilty, are you more or less likely to want to be with that person? There is an important difference between feeling guilty and taking responsibility. I once heard that guilt is what you feel because of what you did, but responsibility is what you take because of the kind of person you want to be.

The distinction between guilt and responsibility is not simply a theoretical moral or linguistic distinction. It is a distinction that quite profoundly affects the way we deal with the issue at hand. When we feel guilty we usually feel powerless. We feel violated, either by our own abandonment of our values, or because somebody else "made us feel that way." That's why we often attribute our guilt to others ("Why are you always making me feel guilty?"). Guilt often leads to defensiveness, anxiety, and shame, and because we feel blamed, either by others, or ourselves, it also may lead to retaliation. This is one of the reasons there is such strong white male backlash around diversity and inclusion issues. White men are reacting to being blamed and "made" to feel guilty for things they often don't realize that they're doing, or for privileges they don't realize they have had for longer than any of them have been alive. I want to be clear that I'm not suggesting that there are not a lot of white men who have done things, and do things, that have harmed others. On the

contrary. However, for many, these behaviors occur without people ever realizing they are engaging in the behaviors.

On the other hand, when we take responsibility for our actions, we empower ourselves. We can bring compassion to ourselves and to others for our blind spots. We are, by the very nature of the word, "able to respond" to the situation at hand. We can be motivated to grow, to develop, to improve ourselves and transform our ways of being. We have an opportunity to correct our mistakes and move forward and, we hope, improve the situation. In doing so, we can remove the "good person/bad person" stigma, and instead deal with each other as human beings, with all of us trying to figure out how to get along in this world.

Again, I want to be very clear: I am not in any way suggesting we avoid dealing with people who are overtly hostile or biased. We have to establish a zero tolerance policy for that kind of behavior. But the evidence is very clear, and it is that, overwhelmingly, most bias is unconscious. When we treat people who don't know they are demonstrating bias in a way that suggests there is something evil about them, we not only put them on the defensive, but we also lose the ability to influence them because they have no idea what we are focused on.

Once we understand that we have bias, we have to develop a practice to learn to identify our biases. This becomes much easier when we do not see ourselves as bad people for having them. There are a number of ways to begin to identify some of our personal biases. One is by using the IAT discussed earlier in this book. It is a free, computer-based test you can take yourself by going to <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>. The website includes a number of different tests that allow you to compare your associations between different groups (e.g., white versus black, male versus female, Christian versus Jewish). It will give you feedback as to

which group you associate with in more positive or negative ways.

The IAT is based on a testing model called Stroop testing, which was originally developed by John Ridley Stroop, a psychologist who was one of the pioneers in the study of cognition and interference. The Stroop test is based on the notion that we unconsciously make associations much more quickly than we consciously make associations. In fact, modern technology has since proven Stroop right time and again. For example, the conscious mind takes about three hundred milliseconds to process an image. But when people are observed through functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) machines, we can see that the unconscious reaction in the brain is much faster, about eighty milliseconds. That means that before our conscious mind has noticed something, the unconscious mind may already be in action in response to it.

In the classic Stroop test, participants are shown a series of letter combinations that are simply mixtures of random letters that are printed in different colors. Participants are then asked to quickly state the color they see. They are then shown a second set of words and asked to perform the same task, except this time the letters form the names of colors that are different from the color of the text (e.g., the word “red” in green ink). The inevitable response is a slight hesitancy that makes the second test seem to run slower than the first. The unconscious mind can’t help but respond to the word “red,” because we have been conditioned to read automatically. The conscious mind hesitates for a moment before realizing it is supposed to say “green.”

The IAT shows the participant images of people and related words. The unconscious mind quickly associates the words with the images. Positive words are more quickly associated with the people we feel more positively toward. Negative words are more quickly associated with those about whom we have negative biases. Because

the reactions are slightly slower when the words are different than our unconscious biases, the test can identify them by measuring the time it takes to answer each match.

The IAT has been used in hundreds of studies to measure bias, and as such, it has made an enormous contribution to the study of unconscious bias. However, the test is not without its critics. Most of the challenges to the IAT come with the caution that the results may not be as definitive as they suggest. Some researchers have contended that it is not clear what is being measured by the IAT. Other critics maintain that the people who administer it may influence the test. For instance, a participant may respond slightly differently if a white male, or an African American woman, proctors the test. Others have suggested that the test can be influenced by the environmental influences of the time. Negative responses toward Muslims, for example, rose after September 11, 2001, and negative responses toward African Americans diminished immediately after Barack Obama was inaugurated (although they returned to their previous levels shortly afterward). In addition, many people find that when they take the test at different times they get different responses.

My personal experience has been that the test is valuable when used as a directional pointer to explore one’s blind spots. In that framework, it has contributed tremendously to our ability to study the impact of unconscious bias. The danger can often be not in the test itself, but in how it is used. For example, I have heard people suggest that potential employees should take the IAT as part of an interviewing process. To me, this would be a very bad idea. I say this because the IAT is a measure of implicit associations, and is not always a measure of behaviors. As I described in an earlier chapter, many people test more positively regarding people in groups other than their own, especially if the groups are nondominant ones that

have historically been negatively stereotyped. The key is not to take the IAT result as a “report card on your soul,” but rather to see it as a helpful pointer that can give us some insight into our unconscious “programming.”

There are a number of other tools that have emerged in more recent years that have brought awareness to our unconscious biases. British psychologist Pete Jones has created a tool, Implicitly□, which claims to be the first commercial online test of unconscious bias that reliably measures an individual’s risk of exhibiting biased behavior at work. Helen Turnbull, another American psychologist, has created yet another test called “Cognizant,” which is similarly claimed to have the ability to measure unconscious biases. Once again, the key in using any of these tests is to use them for exploration and not as a “report card.”

Another way to begin to obtain clarity regarding some of your own biases is through the narrative tradition. Each of us has a narrative that makes up our lives, a collection of stories and experiences that have contributed to the way we see and experience the world. Our narrative creates the background filter through which we process what we encounter. This creates a perceptual identity through which we see the world.^[3]

Our perceptual identity functions as a lens that is greatly influenced by four major areas. The first is the culture or cultures that we grow up in. We are influenced by culture more than we realize because much of that influence is preverbal. Even as babies we see, feel, smell, hear, and generally sense what is “right” or “wrong” to do. We also are exposed to things that have happened to people like us, so we develop a second lens that is based on our group identity. Women, for example, need not have been victims of rape or sexual violence for them to think about those things when they are walking alone at night, because such things have happened to

enough other women. Our natural tendency to associate with those like us (remember our mirror neurons!) causes us to internalize those concerns. We also have gone through hundreds of personal experiences throughout our lives that shape our perceptual lens, as well as the different institutions to which we have belonged in some way or another. All of these things dramatically affect what we see and how we react to what we see.

When we set aside time to reflect on our narrative, we often can find that we have taken certain elements of the past and constructed an entire framework based on those elements. Of course, the challenge for us is that our memories are not nearly as accurate as we think they are, no matter how “vividly” we think we remember things. In fact, we remember things quite selectively and we often make assessments about things based on that limited information.

Identifying where our narratives about different people originate is important. The closer we get to the root of our bias, the more we can create a new narrative that disarms it. The story I mentioned earlier about the African American woman who was told that she “had to be twice as good as white people” is a good example. Once she reframed that narrative, she reported experiencing immense freedom to be herself and appreciate herself.

Timothy Wilson, the Sherrell J. Aston Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia, has studied this extensively.^[4] He has found people can “redirect” their subconscious narrative by being exposed to alternative narratives. For instance, a person who has developed an entrenched negative bias about certain racial groups of people can have that narrative transformed by being exposed to people or stories about people who have lived, worked, and loved together across the divide between their own group and the group against which they harbored the bias. People who are experiencing challenges in their lives can transform their relationship with that

challenge when they are exposed to other people who have overcome those challenges.

This method is far more successful than the way we have usually tried to approach changing our narratives through more fear-based methods. Here's a good example. In the 1970s, many juvenile detention programs began to institute "Scared Straight" programs, based on a program that was initially created at Rahway State Prison in New Jersey. The idea was to have young people meet with convicted criminals who would supposedly frighten them back on track by telling them the horrors of prison life. At some level there is logic to this kind of negative deterrent. The only problem is that it hasn't worked.^[5] The results indicate that more, not less, of the young people exposed to "Scared Straight" get in trouble. It seems they are stimulated by the strength they see in the anger of the convicts and they, in a somewhat bizarre sense, become unconscious role models to the students. The internal narrative of the students shifts to "maybe I should try that too."

A similar pattern also can be true when people in a dominant group (e.g., white men) are exposed to diversity programs in which they are confronted by the anger of another group (e.g., white women or men and women of color), and told how much they have been hurt, harmed, or abused by the people in the dominant group. This method was a fundamental part of a lot of diversity training programs, and is still used in more subtle forms today. The release of anger may be understandable, and the cathartic impact it makes upon the person releasing it may be very powerful. However, the impact on the member of a dominant group may be regressive in that it leaves them feeling more different from, more afraid of, and less empathetic toward the member of the nondominant group. In fact, studies of approaches to mitigating unconscious bias now demonstrate that this technique is one of the least effective!^[6]

The key lives in our willingness to explore our own personal narrative. If you are interested in doing this kind of self-exploration, you might want to ask yourself a few simple questions:

- What things did you learn from your culture of origin that affect your values and behaviors today? How are they different from what others may have learned? How do those differences affect your relationships with others?
- Was there a time when you recalled feeling "different" from those around you? How did it make you feel? How did it affect your behavior?
- What institutions were you a part of that influenced your values and behaviors (e.g., religious institutions, Boy/Girl Scouts, schools, clubs)?

When we remove the self-criticism about our biases and take on the task of self-exploration, it can be a very illuminating experience.

Our ego is not permanent. It is constantly shifting and evolving, influenced by the narrative we are in at the moment and the integration of the experiences we are encountering. A lifetime narrative can be rewritten. I will never forget a story I once heard someone tell. It went something like this:

I was a pretty good baseball player when I was younger. I played all the way through college, but it was an especially important part of my life in high school. I was one of the best players on my team. One of the things that used to really upset me was that my father never came to see me play. He was much older when I was born and was an immigrant, very old world. We never talked about it because he seemed to be always working. He died when I was in college. A number of years later I went back to my fifteenth high school reunion. My old baseball coach, who was a real mentor to me, was still at the school and so, of course, I went over and talked with him for a while. We chatted a bit and then he asked me about my parents.

I told him that my father had passed away (my mother was still alive). The coach said, “that’s too bad. He was a very nice man.” I was a bit stunned. I didn’t know that my coach had ever even met my father. I was so nonplussed that I didn’t say anything, but the next morning I called my mother and told her what happened. For a moment she was silent. Then she told me something I never knew. It turns out my father was very sensitive about being so “old world” and was afraid my sister and I were embarrassed by him and his ways. He didn’t want that to bother me while I was playing. So he would come and watch my games from behind the stands. He apparently almost never missed a game. And then while I was showering, he would sometimes slip in to talk to the coach. I never knew. At first I felt terribly sad, but over time I saw it for what it was: a father’s deep love for his son. My whole relationship to my father throughout my life changed. Even though he was dead, we had a whole new relationship!

2. Develop the capacity for self-observation.

To refine our ability to “see ourselves in action,” we have to *work to develop the capacity of self-observation*, or, as my friend and colleague Michael Schiesser likes to say, to “turn the flashlight on ourselves.” We generally are looking outward at the world, with very little attention to the filter that is interpreting what we are seeing. When we observe ourselves, we are activating our metacognitive ability and activating our prefrontal neocortex. We become more thoughtful. We have the ability to observe ourselves in action.

When we do that, we become less reactive. Our amygdala can begin to “relax” a bit. The more we name what is going on with us, the quieter the amygdala becomes, and we are less likely to be hijacked by the amygdala’s automatic reaction. And when we share with others what is going on with us, it softens even more. Scientists

who are discovering this are just now catching up to what the Buddha observed almost 2,500 years ago when he said, “that which can be observed, I am not.”

So, when we consciously observe ourselves, we have the opportunity to step on the clutch and “shift into neutral” by dis-identifying from the automatic reactions that usually dominate our thinking.

We can learn to observe ourselves at several different levels. For the most part we focus on behavior, what we are saying and doing. I also have been discussing our metacognitive capability, or the capacity to watch what we are thinking. In my experience, one of the most powerful ways to observe ourselves is by learning to observe our somatic responses, or the way our reactions show up in the physical body.

For the most part, our thoughts are not focused on the present moment. They are stimulated by what happens in the present moment, but mostly they quickly then reference either a memory from the past that frames how we interpret what is going on and puts it into a context for us to process, or a fear about what might happen in the future. Our biases clearly engage both aspects of this response. The memory of the past leads us to our beliefs about the person or people we are dealing with, and then informs our concern about our future interactions with those people. How might it be possible to become more aware of these patterns of thinking?

Over the course of the past couple of decades there has been a broad expansion of our awareness of the mind/body connection. Herbert Benson, a cardiologist and founder of the Benson-Henry Mind Body Institute at Massachusetts General Hospital, is one of the people most widely credited with bringing this phenomenon into the mainstream, primarily through his 1975 best-selling book, *The Relaxation Response*.^[7] In the book, Benson explained the role that

cortisol plays in our stress response.

Cortisol, or hydrocortisone, is a steroid hormone that the human body releases during times of stress. Among other things, cortisol combines with adrenaline to help create memories of shorter-term emotional events. These have been called “flashbulb memories” or snapshots of key moments for which we retain vivid memories. Think about exceptional moments from your past. Where were you when the attack on September 11, 2001, occurred? Or, if you are old enough, when President Kennedy was assassinated? Not hard to remember, is it? And yet, despite our capacity for vivid remembrance, we have a hard time remembering something from just a few days ago.

High cortisol levels also have been shown to be associated with social fear responses, avoidance, and social anxiety disorder, all of which can contribute to the fear-related aspects of bias.^[8] Benson has shown that various mindfulness and meditation practices reduce the level of cortisol that is released into the body, quieting the nervous system response.

You can experiment with this yourself. Find a picture of somebody or a group of people who you generally don’t feel especially comfortable being around. Look at the picture and then observe where in your body you feel a reaction. Tightness in the abdomen or throat? Increased respiration or heart rate? There is no reason to change whatever sensation you observe, you simply notice it. Then close your eyes for five minutes (you may want to set a timer) and draw your breath a little bit more deeply than usual, focusing into the area of the body that you identified. After the time is up, look again at the picture. Often the visceral reaction to the person or people will be significantly reduced.

Various forms of meditation or other contemplative practices can be very helpful in this regard. Over time they help to quiet the

incessant chatter of the mind and bring a sense of deeper calm and reflection that moderates the ability of the amygdala to hijack our perceptions and behaviors and encourages more prefrontal activity. From that quieter place, it is often easier to “see ourselves in action” and adjust our behavior accordingly.

Contemplation and self-observation, like so many other things in life, is a habit that becomes strengthened with practice. Very few people sit down and meditate for the first time and find it to be a simple task. Mostly what we see is how busy our minds are, filled with judgments, self-correction, and seemingly mindless chatter. The more we actively work on developing the capacity to slow down our thinking and watch it, the easier it becomes and the more self-observant we naturally become. Our willingness to be vulnerable to what we see also is important. If we can refrain from judging ourselves too harshly, and instead just work on observing, it is far easier to disengage from the automaticity that our internal narrative creates.

3. Practice constructive uncertainty.

Taking these sorts of breaks in our thinking can disable the stress-bias reaction in our brain and help us be more present to what is going on right now. To do that, we have to develop another practice that is very important in navigating our unconscious bias by creating what I like to refer to as *constructive uncertainty*. I realize that is an odd term—constructive uncertainty—but here’s what I mean. We live in a culture that loves certainty. Have you noticed that more often than not it is the person who is the most certain about their point of view (and not afraid to show it!) that wins the argument? We don’t have much patience for thoughtfulness. It often seems like we are happier when we quickly get to the wrong answer than we are when we have taken too much time to ruminate over the right one.

Our biases are generally fast, reflexive reactions that emanate from our limbic system. The automaticity of these responses usually puts us in reaction to them without any questioning. To move to a more thoughtful conscious state, to start engaging the prefrontal neocortex in metacognitive thinking, we need to pause. The existentialist psychologist Rollo May once said that “human freedom involves our capacity to pause between the stimulus and response and, in that pause, to choose the one response toward which we wish to throw our weight. The capacity to create ourselves, based upon this freedom, is inseparable from consciousness or self-awareness.”^[9]

Thus, observing ourselves gives us the opportunity to evaluate the circumstance we are in. We even use the word “PAUSE” as an acronym to remind us to:

- **Pay attention to what’s happening beneath the judgments and assessments.**
 - When we slow down and look at what’s happening we have an opportunity to distinguish between an event and our interpretation of that event. For example, say somebody shakes your hand softly. Do you have a visceral reaction and association with weakness as many people in the United States do? (“Limp!” “Cold fish!”) What happened is that they used less pressure in the handshake than you are used to with most people. The rest is your interpretation, which leads us to the next step.
- **Acknowledge your own reactions, interpretations, and judgments.**
 - This is where you have an opportunity to identify your interpretation *as an interpretation*. You might say something to yourself like, “I can see that when he shook my hand softly, I interpreted that as weakness.” As soon

as you notice an interpretation as an interpretation, you have moved to a higher level of consciousness. You have given yourself the freedom to which Rollo May referenced. From there you can move to step three.

- **Understand the other possible reactions, interpretations, and judgments that may be possible.**
 - There may be any number of other reasons for the behavior. In the case of the handshake, the person may come from a different culture (because a significant percentage of people in different parts of the world shake hands more softly than we do in the United States), or may have an injury, or be recovering from an injury. Or they may have arthritis, or—whatever! Looking at all the possibilities reinforces the dis-identification from our initial reaction and opens up the possibility to:
- **Search for the most constructive, empowering, or productive way to deal with the situation.**
 - What makes the most sense? Should I assume that the person is weak because of my initial reaction to his handshake, or should I get to know him a little better before I make a definitive assessment? What should I say? What is the best way to handle the circumstance? Once you have a plan in place, then you can:
- **Execute your action plan.**
 - Act consistently with what makes the most sense.

Constructive uncertainty leads to better thinking. We would be far better off if we turned many of our exclamation points about things into question marks and didn’t feel the need to be so sure of ourselves all of the time. In fact, the other benefit of constructive uncertainty is that it makes us far more open to the ideas and perspectives of other people. When you know that you are dealing

with an issue or situation in which you find yourself definitively sure of yourself, it can be very helpful to seek out a healthy skeptical point of view. As opposed to cynicism, which can be quite toxic, skepticism can help us see things we may have missed in our certainty. Often when I am working with teams who are excited about a new direction they want to head in, I will ask the team to be consciously skeptical about the plan so that in their enthusiasm they don't miss possible roadblocks that may derail their efforts.

All the same, I do want to be clear that I named this “constructive” uncertainty for a reason. I am not advocating paralysis by analysis, or long, drawn-out navel gazing. I'm simply saying that a pause can help us be more thoughtful and help disengage some of the automaticity of our biases.

4. Explore awkwardness or discomfort.

Another way to work on your personal biases is to be open to *exploring those incidents that occur when you feel awkwardness or discomfort around certain kinds of people or certain circumstances*. Putting political correctness aside, there are times when we notice that certain types of people trigger feelings of discomfort within us. Our standard response at times like that is to slip into some kind of “fight or flight” reaction. We either will tend to withdraw or get defensive. Times like this can often be valuable learning opportunities for us. If we are having a strong emotional reaction, some fear is being stimulated, and it is usually another sign that we are reacting from our past. At those moments, when possible, we can learn a lot about ourselves by asking a few questions:

- Am I reacting to what is happening now, or is this person or situation currently threatening to me?
- Is there any immediate action that needs to be taken?
- How do people or situations like this affect my behavior on a regular basis?

- Is there somebody with whom I should talk about the circumstance?

5. Engage with people in groups you may not know very well, or about whom you harbor biases.

One of the most effective ways to begin to dis-identify with our biases is through exposure to people and groups we harbor biases against. Gordon Allport is often credited as the “father” of the “contact hypothesis” of race relations. Allport, a Harvard psychologist, postulated that, under the right circumstances, contact between conflicting groups, was an effective way to diminish prejudice and stereotyping.^[10]

More recently, a team of researchers led by Calvin Lai and Brian Nosek, social psychologists at the University of Virginia, analyzed eighteen different strategies to see which are the most effective for addressing unconscious bias.^[11] They found that some of the traditional strategies for addressing bias have not proven to be all that successful. For instance, exhaustive efforts to get people in the dominant group to understand the plight of people in nondominant groups can often create a greater sense of difference between the groups and, as I noted earlier, reduce the sense of connection and empathy to the “out group.”

Lai and Nosek's study did reveal that one of the most effective ways to begin to “reprogram” our biases toward certain groups is to *expose people to counter-stereotypes or exemplars of the particular group in question*. When we are exposed to examples of people who have been successful, or are appealing to us from the group in question, our generalized negative biases toward that group seem to begin to diminish. This may occur through creating an environment in which we are reminded through pictures or other artifacts about the contributions of a particular group. It also is why events such as Black History Month (February), Women's History Month (March),

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Pride Month (June), or National Hispanic Heritage Month (September 15–October 15) can be helpful to expose people to some of these counter-stereotypes. Of course, it is even more helpful when these exemplars are exposed to us on a regular basis every month of the year!

In our own environments, we can begin to expose ourselves through the pictures we have on our walls and computers; by reading stories and learning about people from other groups besides our own; attending cultural festivals; studying another culture's stories and literature, etc. The bottom line is, the more we get to know people for who they are, the less we treat them like what they are (or at least what they appear to us).

6. Get feedback and data.

The final individual intervention I want to point out is *getting feedback and data*. Data can be especially important because information can point us in the direction of concerns to which we may have become unconscious. For example, imagine you are a supervisor who has to write performance evaluations for ten employees, five men and five women. After you finish the reviews you rank them from strongest to weakest and find that four out of the top five scores are women. Does this mean that you have a bias toward women? Not necessarily, but at the very least it should encourage you to explore the question.

Data are also important because all too often we judge the success or failure of our efforts based on how much they “make sense” or on how they feel to the participants, rather than on a real sense of producing empiric results. I recognize that not everything can be measured, but measurement can be helpful to assist us in questioning how successful we are being. One of my clients instituted a mentoring program that was specifically designed to assist female lawyers and young associates of color to successfully adapt to their

culture. It was well intended, and the people who participated found it valuable. But the numbers showed that less than 30 percent of the people who were eligible participated, because the rest were concerned that participation was an acknowledgment that they weren't as capable as the white male associates. Only after the communication about the program and its structure were changed did it begin to produce results.

To get these kinds of data and feedback on a regular basis, we have to find ways to create environments around us that allow people to be willing and able to engage in the question. In the next chapter, I will “shift out of neutral” and take a look at the structures we can develop to create more conscious organizational communities.

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