A New Path to Diversity and Inclusion

We can rewire our brains to eliminate biases.

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Henry David Thoreau said, “It is never too late to give up your prejudices.” We emphatically agree, but from our many years in the field of diversity and inclusion, we know that choosing to lose our feelings of bias and prejudice can be challenging. We have observed that people are often most comfortable with those who are similar to them and that feeling a connection to those who are different comes less naturally.

Sometimes we may judge others and behave differently towards them without even realizing it, due to the implicit biases—or preconceived attitudes—that we all have. But we have also noticed that some people seem naturally motivated to build relationships with people who are alike and different. These people, whom we call “intrinsically inclusive™,” are significantly less likely to be influenced by implicit biases.

In previous articles in this series (parts 1, 2, & 3), we have talked about how information gleaned from social psychology and neuroscience is giving us a new understanding of diversity and inclusion. We believe that research can show us how to work with our brains’ wiring to move forward. In this article, we’ll discuss some ways we can transcend our preconceived ideas and become more open to change.

The MODE model

In our last article, we discussed the work of psychologist Russell Fazio, Ph.D., based at The Ohio State University, and his colleagues. Among other areas, Dr. Fazio has studied how culturally transmitted prejudices impact the attitudes we form. A theory, known as the MODE model, he says, can be harnessed to “push pause” on our automatically activated attitudes and open up our thought processes.

The acronym MODE refers to how “motivation and opportunity can be deterrents to spontaneous behavior.” In the model, “motivation” is defined as incentives that might cause us to stop and think about outcomes. These incentives might include concerns for our safety, ways to avoid embarrassment or new and striking information.

“Opportunity” means that we are in a place where we can think clearly and consciously—in other words, we’re not in a stressed, rushed or exhausted state. If motivation is strong enough and opportunity is right, we have the ability to interrupt an automatic thought process such as a bias and choose to think and act differently.

Researchers have identified several effective motivators that we believe can influence us to be more open to diverse and inclusive ways of thinking. They include significant emotional events, frequent exposure combined with significant relationships, and neuromotor syncing. One interesting thing that connects these motivators is...
Life-altering experience: significant emotional event

Personal events that touch us deeply can upend patterned thinking. Here's one example: imagine that your young child has an accident and hits her head. When you rush into the emergency room holding a cold compress to the bump, a young female doctor with a foreign accent immediately shepherds you into a treatment room. Her manner is so calm and kind that your child, who has been screaming inconsolably, quiets down almost immediately. And you are relieved and grateful to learn after examination that she will be fine.

After the adrenaline rush caused by an incident like this, it's likely that any biases you might have had towards young, female, foreign doctors have been replaced by positive associations. In fact, your brain is much more likely to begin associating all such physicians with characteristics such as competence and trustworthiness.

Changing your mind: Frequent exposure and significant relationships

Some of us have seen the influence of frequent exposure when we move to a new place. Let's imagine you've lived in a relatively rural area in the Pacific Northwest, and a job assignment sends you to a southern city. You're used to weather that is cloudy and misty most days, and in your new home, it's hot and muggy. You're accustomed to the town closing down at nine and now the city never sleeps. Popular foods, local customs, even your neighbors' regional accents are very different. It is all disconcerting, and you may be homesick and compare what is around you with what you are familiar with.

But over the months, you begin to visit local attractions and attend social events with colleagues and neighbors. You meet new friends and they become important to you. When you receive the news that your grandmother has passed away, your neighbor gives you a lift to the airport and keeps an eye on your apartment in your absence.

When your work in the South ends after a year, you leave with a new attitude towards people from other locales and their customs. Opening our minds to different experiences in this way combats bias and encourages inclusion.

Fostering empathy: neuromotor syncing
According to researchers like Dr. Andrea Serino, they may be encouraging empathy through synchronized movement. Dr. Serino, professor at the Center for Neuroprosthetics of École Polytechnique Federale de Lausanne (Swiss Federal Institute of Technology), and his research team examine how our brains create our experience of our physical bodies. Often using virtual reality techniques, they study how we use our sense of our bodies to interact with others.

When we move with another person, says Dr. Serino, we may actually begin to feel something similar to what they are feeling. This sense of belonging and trust from coordinate movement may have originated very early in our lives: when we were rocked as babies, we learned to associate rhythmic, synchronized movement with connection.

Dr. Serino's research posits that neuromotor syncing has the potential to help people form bonds, which may provide motivation to pause and examine biases. Findings to date have caused him to ask how we might use this information to manipulate social attitudes and help us better relate to others who are unlike us.

**Pause and consider new possibilities**

We all have biases. Recent research conducted at the University of York found evidence that we can form a first impression in as little as 33 to 100 milliseconds. The 126 university students in the study made judgments about the status, trustworthiness and attractiveness of people in photographs after a single glance.

We may not be able to stop ourselves from experiencing these automatic reactions in the workplace and social situations. But through greater awareness of our biases and techniques such as the three we have discussed here, we may be on the way to experiencing a new reality and new possibilities. Neuroscience tells us that novel events and ways of thinking cause neural connections and pathways to form in our brains, which makes the possibility of our reacting differently in the future even more likely.

The next time a stimulus causes us to activate an old attitude or an old judgment, we can pause and consider. It's within all of us to choose the path of intrinsic inclusion, to embrace new attitudes and new information. And that is our opportunity to think, and act, differently in our workplaces and in our lives.

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