



## “Act as If...”

Sondra Thiederman, Ph.D.

Bias=An inflexible positive or negative conscious or unconscious belief about a particular category of people.

Have you ever had an attitude that, no matter how hard you tried, you just couldn't seem to change? Maybe you wanted to become more receptive to new kinds of experiences or overcome a tendency to get irritated too quickly. We all have challenges similar to these – for me, it's a pesky tendency to be just a little bit too judgmental. Try as I might, I have had a heck of a time changing what really amounts to a mental habit of thought – a way of thinking that, in turn, dictates my behavior and reactions.

Bias is like that – sometimes, no matter how hard we try, it just won't go away. The good news is that with bias, as with any other destructive attitude, there is hope. That hope lies in a simple suggestion:

***Act as if you don't have the bias.***

In other words, “Fake it till you make it.”

This article will show how to do just that – behave as if you don't have a bias even though that inflexible belief is still bouncing around inside your head.

The beauty of “faking it,” is, not only will your new behavior result in a better response from those around you, acting as if you don’t have a bias can – strange as it seems – actually cause that bias to disappear.

I’ll admit this seems pretty weird, but psychologists have proven it over and over again. The reason attitudes change to conform to behaviors lies in the psychological truism that most of us can’t stand doing something that does not conform to what we really believe. Because the feeling is so unpleasant, something has to give, and, if we are stuck with the behavior, we are forced by our discomfort to change our attitude.

I have created a character named Bess to show how beneficial faking behavior can be. ***Here’s Your Task:*** As you read what Bess did to overcome her bias, think about what behavior you might change to get the same result.

Ever since she can remember, Bess has had, as she put it, a “thing” about people who don’t speak English to her personal high standard. As soon as she hears them speak, her mind is filled with judgments like “unintelligent,” “uncreative,” and “doesn’t have much to contribute.”

As bad as Bess felt about this point of view, she just couldn’t seem to kick it. Finally, she decided, if she couldn’t change the attitude, at least she could change her behavior. In order to make this happen, Bess made a list of the things her bias caused her to do and the consequences of those behaviors. Here are just a few of these bias-driven behaviors and their results:

1. *Behavior:* Failure to initiate conversations with certain employees.

*Negative consequences:* Perception of discrimination. Alienation of the team. Bess' inability to know members of her team as individuals.

2. *Behavior:* Failure to assign select team members to plum projects.

*Negative consequences:* Employees' inability to gain valuable experience and exposure. Perception (or reality) of discrimination.

3. *Behavior:* Failure to call on particular employees during meetings.

*Negative consequences:* Employees' missed opportunities to voice ideas or ask questions. Unheard ideas that might have benefited the organization. Perception (or reality) of discrimination.

Having made this behavior concrete and measurable, Bess set out to do things differently:

1. *Substitute behavior:* Bess consciously began to initiate conversations with people whom she used to ignore.

*Positive Consequences:* She discovered how much they had to offer, began to feel better about them, and, in turn, started treating them more fairly.

2. *Substitute behavior:* Bess began carefully considering all qualified employees – regardless of their communication style – for all projects. Notice, I said, “those who were qualified”; she resisted the temptation to patronize anyone just because they were different from herself.

*Positive Consequence:* Most of the employees excelled.

3. *Substitute behavior:* Bess began to call on people more equally during meetings and, most important, really listen to what they had to say.

*Positive Consequences:* She and her team were exposed to different perspectives. Also, the employees were able to gradually hone their communication skills.

The ultimate consequence was that Bess's bias began to fade. It faded for two reasons. First, it faded because the difference between her behavior and her biased attitude subconsciously bothered Bess. The two could not cohabit in the same person. Fortunately, in Bess's case, it was the bias that moved out first.

The second reason her bias faded was that it just couldn't survive the onslaught of positive and varied information that Bess's new behaviors caused to come her way. The better she treated people, the better they responded; the better they responded, the more positive her experience; the more positive her experience, the better she felt about a group whom she had previously dismissed.

Fake it till you make it; it works.

Sondra Thiederman is a speaker and author on bias-reduction, diversity, and cross-cultural issues. Her latest book *Making Diversity Work: Seven Steps for Defeating Bias in the Workplace*, and DVD Course, *Is It Bias?* are available through Learning Communications. For information on these products and Keynotes and Workshops with Sondra Thiederman, contact Learning Communications at 800-622-3610, [sales@learncom.com](mailto:sales@learncom.com) or visit our website – <http://www.learncom.com>

Copyright 2010 Cross-Cultural Communications