

Developing Empathy through Experiential Training

Many people are familiar with unconscious bias and how it can negatively impact our workplaces and communities. However, the capability of defining unconscious bias doesn't necessarily translate into demonstrable action. In simpler words, knowing that regular exercise is healthy, won't result in your attendance to the gym 3 times a week.

Our methodology to achieve behavior change posits that it's not enough to only trigger the cognitive part of our brain, but the emotional and ontological parts of a person as well. The more the brain experiences an emotional association to a piece of data, the more that data will have a chance to enter our long-term memory tracks. Therefore, it makes sense that the more you can couple a cognitive experience about bias with an emotional connection to it, the more likely the learning experience will stick.

However, we often encounter the desire to veer away from getting "too emotional" in the workplace. Caution in this area is well warranted. If people associate a diversity training with an emotion like shame or guilt, or are forced into a vulnerable position, it could make them less likely engage in deep, personal exploration. We often encounter hesitation around the topic of bias, even before a session has begun, because of individuals' emotional guards. Saying what they really think and believe can feel like too high a risk. Participants may shy away from talking truthfully for any number of reasons. It could be a fear of accusations of being narrow-minded, weak, sexist, racist, homophobic, overly race conscious, not politically progressive enough, or too conservative. Or, one might be afraid that others will view them differently if their sexual orientation, non-visible disabilities, education, class background, or religious affiliation are revealed. All these concerns and many more can cause people to put up emotional guard rails, withdraw, and deprive the group of their experiences and perspective.

On the other hand, cultivating the right level of public exchange can have a huge payoff. If the emotional tone of the group experience is healthy, it can motivate people to speak up more and create deeper connections.

Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, a psychiatrist who has studied Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder since the 1970s, has [suggested that improvisation](#), theatre and other experiential methods are superior to traditional talk therapy. He repeatedly cites the importance of meaningful physical action to loosen the trauma sensations that have been "stuck" in the brain's nonverbal and non-conscious subcortical regions, where they are not accessible to the understanding, thinking, and reasoning parts of the brain.

People are often stuck in their past experiences. Rather than relating to the person in front of them, they are thinking of someone that person reminds them of. Or, rather than listening to a rational argument they are hearing, they are responding to what the last commentator they heard said on the subject.

To counter this, it's important to create an atmosphere that invites emotional exploration. A well-crafted action activity like the 4 corners exercise offers a safe level of vulnerability and control to participants. This exercise allows a group to spontaneously and randomly share their perceptions on a chosen topic. To do this exercise, split the room into four corners and instruct participants to assign themselves to one corner. One at a time, someone makes a statement about something they believe in (any statement is fine). As they make the statement, they move definitively to a different corner. If

participants agree with that person's statement, they join the person; if they don't agree, they move away.

I recently used this technique to explore how a group of people who were taking part in a leadership development program were experiencing the political divide in the United States. One purpose of this training was to equip participants to be courageous and intentional about removing barriers to inclusion in their organizations and communities.

Through the simplicity of moving and walking amongst themselves, participants individually and collectively shared deep feelings, beliefs, and attitudes about their current experiences. Walking statements included: "I feel fearful I'll make a mistake when I'm talking about politics because I don't know where others stand," "I feel I'm losing my respect for authority," and "I'm glad people are being more honest."

A large part of the success of this emotional exploration was what happened after the exercise was over. Not only had the group felt more connected after sharing, but members were able to share more of themselves with each other. The following morning one group member shared that the activity had prompted them to share their political standing with rest of the group. The individual shared they had been afraid to publicly share their political beliefs before for fear of being excluded.

One reason the 4 corners exercise worked for this group has to do with the fact that the brain is a social organ that is constructed through experience and connection. Experience changes not only the brain's physical structure, but also functional organization. We learn that the brain does not distinguish between experiences of daily life and experiences that are structured within a classroom or other protected setting. Therefore, the emotional tone of the group experience created a healthy emotional exploration to motivate the group to deepen their connections across difference rather than retreat.

Each physical step taken in the 4 corners exercise began to unlock stuck aspects of the participants' brains. They were moving themselves from unconscious beliefs and attitudes about this challenging topic into more conscious awareness. Participants were also able to experience each other's perspectives as individuals, rather than devolving into "us versus them" thinking by grouping people into "those people." Ultimately, we are providing the opportunity to create empathy.

If you plan to attend the Forum on Workplace Inclusion this month, join me from 2:15-3:45pm on April 17th for my session, [*Exploratory Experiences: Utilizing Creative Training Methods to Build Empathy and Inclusion*](#) where you'll get to experience the 4 corners exercise for yourself!