

Guarding against the bias virus

By Christopher Harding

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When it comes to creating a culture of peace together — whether in our company, community or home — one of the factors that can significantly derail our efforts is a phenomenon called “implicit bias.” The term implicit bias was coined by social psychologists in reference to the human propensity to act out our preconceptions about people who are not part of our group as if those assumptions were unequivocally true.

Although the brain seems to naturally default to biases as a shortcut to speed up our ability to make decisions, this natural tendency is now considered by some organizations as a serious problem. As one executive at a Fortune 100 company recently shared with me, “Unconscious bias is a significant barrier to our ability to effectively solve the type of complex challenges we now face.” Other organizations have gone so far as to label the brain’s shortcut process the “Virus of Bias” because it spreads so easily and rapidly throughout an organization below the level of our conscious awareness.

Over the last decade, the science of implicit bias has made significant leaps forward due in part to Harvard University’s creation of the now famous “Implicit Association Test” (or IAT). The IAT measures the impact underlying cultural and societal biases have on the way we act toward those we consider to be different. The differences explored by the study include gender, race, age or generation, homelessness, height, weight, etc.

One surprising feature of the IAT tests is that anyone who participates discovers that their decisions are driven far more profoundly by imbedded social biases than they would have ever imagined. This is particularly jarring when individuals realize that they are even acting out biases about themselves.

In my own work with organizations, I have seen the malignant effect unchecked “bias cycles” can have on companies, communities, and individuals. For when the “virus of bias” is activated it inevitably creates a divisive “us vs. them” dynamic. This limited thinking inhibits the ability of those involved to consider other more productive solutions beyond those that arise from their implicit biases.

Bringing it home to Ashland, as we seek more effective solutions for the challenges we face as a community, we need to cultivate an awareness of our implicit biases. It is also essential that we challenge the beliefs we have adopted about those people or groups we consider to be “the problem.”

This is one area where the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission (ACPC) can assist the community. In fact, the ACPC has formed a Peace Ambassador Team to help those involved in challenging situations develop the ability to truly listen to each other and, in the process, re-humanize one another. While remaining neutral, they will work to ensure that the full nature of a given community challenge is clearly understood by all sides.

By hosting ACPC Forums, Conversation Circles and employing the skills of Compassionate Listening, Non-Violent Communication and Implicit Bias Awareness, ACPC Peace Ambassadors are available to facilitate community members to discover empowering solutions through collaborative thinking. For, as organizations around the world have discovered, opening our hearts and minds to each other helps us open the doors of our collective creativity and genius.

Creating a culture of peace together will not be an overnight process. Such a significant endeavor requires each of us to be vigilantly aware that we too are vulnerable to the virus of bias. As we work through this process together, however, and learn to bring heart and compassion to all of our conversations and considerations, we will more fully recognize the inherent value of each person within our diverse community. In so doing we will be able to more fully unlock our true capacity as a community to be both peaceful and brilliant.

Christopher Harding is a global management consultant and member of the ACPC Peace Ambassador Team. He and ACPC will offer Implicit Bias Training for everyday citizens and companies from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday, May 21. For more information, email

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