BIAS BREAKERS©  By Arin N. Reeves

We need to recognize that most biases cannot be eliminated, but they can be interrupted before they influence our actions.

Courage is indeed required to break away from the comforts of cognitive ease and to think critically by seeking and integrating multiple perspectives. All of the following Bias Breakers® are generally useful to raise awareness and interrupt biases, but the first three are especially effective in the clinical medical context.

Pay Attention to Surprise
The essence of bias is that it causes us to create expectations about certain realities without actually experiencing those realities. Surprise is our brain’s way of communicating to us that the reality in front of us is different than the expectation. Even if we are not fully aware of the expectations we hold in our mind, we are aware of our surprise. Once you are aware of your own expectations, you are then in control of allowing that slant to impact your actions … or not.

• For one full day (one full week if you are ambitious), keep a written list of everything that surprises you. For example, “I was expecting the patient to be more articulate.” “I was not expecting the patient to adhere so well to the treatment recommendations.” “I didn’t expect her to look like that.” Once you have your list, ask yourself why each of the surprises was, in fact, a surprise.

Oppose Yourself
Challenge your own thinking. This exercise interrupts our leaning to see only the positive in some things and only the negative in other things. Since our brains are weighted to see what we expect to see instead of what is actually in front of us, this exercise adds weight to the other side so our brain can actually evaluate all options equally critically.

• When you make a decision about a person, an event or a thing (especially when you are able to arrive at that decision quickly, easily, or very comfortably), ask yourself to list all of the reasons why you should decide to the contrary.

Ask One Question
For one day or one week, as at least one question in each substantive conversation about something you already think you know.

Focus on Behaviors
When you are in a situation to evaluate a colleague or patient’s potential, accomplishments, and/or abilities, challenge yourself to focus only on evaluating his or her behaviors, not your impressions.

Create Constructive Conflict
Pushing for consensus creates a goal of agreement instead of a goal of finding the best answer(s). Create situations where different perspectives, problem-solving methods, and interpretations create organic conflict. When those different views don’t organically exist, assign someone the role of actively and constructively disagreeing with both the process and the conclusions of decision-making processes.

Experiment with Being an Out-grouper
If it takes courage to be a voice for constructive conflict, it takes sheer bravado to actively become an out-grouper. The more comfortable you feel when you walk into a situation, the more of an in-grouper you have become. Join a running group (if you are not a runner), a knitting circle (if you are not a knitter), a golf clinic (if you have never played golf).
Disrupt Your Patterns
To start, once a day change what you eat for breakfast. Change how you get to work. Change what news sites you visit to get your news. Any change you make to a pattern in your life will translate into an opening for your mind to think differently.

Generate Multiple Right Answers
For every question you ask yourself, don’t stop thinking until you come up with at least two right answers. Dr. Arash Naeim, an oncologist at UCLA’s Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center, concludes in his research that patients should always “[a]sk for alternatives. There is no one right answer and there are multiple options.”1 Take that approach to any problem.

Forecast the Possible
Possibility draws on imagination while predictability draws on history. Create goals for yourself, your team, and your organization around what is possible, not predictable.

Create Micro Unpredictability
Micro unpredictability is the collective effort of small changes that you can make that keep things new and prevent people from operating purely by habit. Small and unexpected changes in routine, agendas, venues, meeting leaders, communication patterns, expectations, and so on can collectively amount to substantive shifts in how people think, learn, and lead.

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