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Is Bias Fixable?

by Nilofer Merchant | 10:16 AM August 28, 2013

“As a brown woman, your chances of being seen and heard in the world are next to nothing,” he said. “For your ideas to be seen, they need to be edgier.” He paused, as if to ruminate on this, before continuing. “But if you are edgy, you will be too scary to be heard.” This was the advice I got from a marketing guru when I asked for his help with titling my second book.

I was confused, as I couldn’t figure out how this answer had any relationship to my original question. I walked — somewhat dazed — to my next meeting and repeated what I’d just heard. In return, I received only blank stares. It wasn’t that these people affirmed his point of view; it’s that they stayed silent. My confusion gradually turned to fear. Was someone finally doing me a service by telling me ... The Truth?

For months after hearing this “... you’ll never be seen” message, I was a mess seeing his “truth” into every missed opportunity or unexpected obstacle.

Black / white. Masculine/feminine. Rich/poor. Immigrant/ native. Gay/straight. Southern/northern. Young/old. Each of us can be described in a series of overlapping identities and roles. And we could spend time talking about the biological and sociological programming that causes humans to form personal identity around group structures. But the bottom line is this: we — as a society — don’t see each other. You are not seen for who you really are, though each of us is a distinct constellation of interests, passions, histories, visions and hopes. And you do not see others.

As David Burkus recently wrote, innovation isn’t an idea problem, but rather a recognition problem (http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2013/07/innovation_isnt_an_idea_proble.html) ; a lack of noticing the good ideas already there. To see and be seen is essential to finding solutions for all of us. Now “noticing” doesn’t seem like an especially hard thing to do, but — let’s be real — it is. That’s because of bias. Bias is shaped by broader culture — something is perceived as “true” — and thus it prevents you from neutrally seeing. Recognizing bias is simply recognizing that you are not impartial — you prescreen by seeing what you expect to see.

Everyone is biased, as research consistently proves (<http://www.boston.com/news/science/blogs/science-in-mind/2013/02/05/everyone-biased-harvard-professor-work-reveals-barely-know-our-own-minds/7x5K4gvrvaT5d3vpDaXC1K/blog.html>) . Yet more often than not, I hear people saying “I’m color blind” or “This place is a meritocracy,” when all modern reality would suggest it can’t be. Nate Silver recently shared research affirming that “those who say they don’t have a gender bias actually show a greater gender bias.” So maybe it’s more this: saying that you aren’t biased probably makes you more blind than color-blind. Because only when you acknowledge that you are blind to an issue, can you begin the process of seeing more clearly.

The real question then becomes: can bias be fixed?

Gail Fairhurst, a prof at the University of Cincinnati, has written several influential papers and books

([http://scholar.google.com/scholar?](http://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=gail+fairhurst++framing&hl=en&as_sdt=0&as_vis=1&oi=scholar&sa=X&ei=LgAeUqO3Ply5sAS6yoGAAw&ved=0CCgQgQMwAA)

[q=gail+fairhurst++framing&hl=en&as_sdt=0&as_vis=1&oi=scholar&sa=X&ei=LgAeUqO3Ply5sAS6yoGAAw&ved=0CCgQgQMwAA](http://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=gail+fairhurst++framing&hl=en&as_sdt=0&as_vis=1&oi=scholar&sa=X&ei=LgAeUqO3Ply5sAS6yoGAAw&ved=0CCgQgQMwAA)) on the art of framing. My thinking is heavily indebted to hers on this issue. As she describes it, the world we live in today is conceived and framed in a particular way. This shapes our experience. Even the language we use orders and reorders social life. The Old Guard (and for Americans, you might read this to be old, white, male, rich) doesn't even recognize this issue of frame. And I would build on her idea that, for the Old Guard, the current narrative is more than a frame, it is "just the way things are." It is, for them, The Truth. This is what that marketing guru was trying to tell me. He never questioned his bias, as a white man, and so he was just breaking the bad news to me, like any friend would.

But here's the good news: a world that has been conceived and framed is also a world that can also be reconceived and reframed. This alone is powerful. If you believe that bias is simply an accumulation of culturally accepted norms, then you can recognize your power in shifting those norms.

For instance, across many arenas of power — legislative, executive, corporate governance, financial — women hold between four and 18 percent of the roles (http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2013/03/three_reasons_men_should_read.html) . And those percentages have been holding steady for some time. But in one category, an important one for how agendas are set, a quiet shift is starting to take place. Major publications that shape the marketplace of ideas were once dominated by men. In fact, a May 2008 Rutgers University study found that, of all the scholarly op-eds in the Wall Street Journal, 97 percent were written by men (<http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2008/0716/p09s01-coop.html>) . Today, women represent between 15 and 21 percent of bylines at publications like the Washington Post, Slate, and the New York Times, representing a 40% improvement (http://www.theopedproject.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=817&Itemid=103) . But this didn't just happen. The program behind this was The Op-Ed Project (<http://www.theopedproject.org/>) , which scouts, prepares, and connects under-represented experts with editors so their pipelines are full of equally viable ideas from both genders.

This is a good reminder that often what appears to be a pipeline problem is actually a problem with the selection process itself. If underrepresented groups have a reasonable expectation of not being selected, it's perfectly reasonable that they don't apply, don't try. But the opposite can be true, too: for instance, Sarah Milstein and Eric Ries designed the 2013 Lean Startup Conference with the intention of inclusion. That shift meant that they went from nearly zero women and people of color at the previous year's conference to a conference featuring 40 percent women and 25 percent people of color (<http://www.startuplessonslearned.com/2012/11/solving-pipeline-problem.html>) . Recognizing that you have a bias allows you to design processes that correct for it.

But first you have to believe in your ability to sway history. One of my favorite stories about this is a relatively unknown historical example. Marilyn Monroe changed Ella Fitzgerald's career (<https://findery.com/californiawilliam/notes/when-marilyn-monroe-met-ella-fitzgerald>) . In the mid-1950s when blacks had a hard enough time getting gigs, and women even more so, Marilyn Monroe lobbied the owner of the famed Mocambo club to book Ella Fitzgerald, promising to take a front table every night if he did. The owner said yes, and Monroe delivered: front table, every night. The press went overboard to cover these evenings, and with that visibility, Fitzgerald got the opportunity to be seen. (Now just imagine if the marketing guru at the start of this story had decided to go beyond just reporting and recognizing bias — telling me, "this is just how it is" — but instead to be an agent of change?)

Whether it was through creating a more level playing field, designing for a more inclusive context, or simply using one's own personal power to change outcomes, bias, in the stories above, was fixable. The key was to acknowledge it, and then design solutions to address it.

This week, there has been a lot of talk about the state of bias in America. The 50th anniversary of the March on Washington is upon us, where Martin Luther King Jr. gave his landmark "I Have a Dream (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smEqnknkfYs>) " speech. His dream included a more just nation — a nation far better than the one he experienced. Today, I want to suggest that dreams are simply goals without an action plan. You can put into action these ideas (or design your own) to create the world you want, and we need.

