From the time we are born, we learn about ourselves, our world, and our place in that world. Those early learnings shape our perceptions of ourselves and others and strongly influence our responses to the situations and people we come in contact with on a daily basis.

Perceptions Shape Our View of the World

Each of us has unique perceptions of ourselves, our world, and the people who populate our world. Our perceptions—shaped by early learnings from parents and other family members, what we learned in school, our neighborhood, places of worship, and so forth—and our own experiences with a variety of people, in a variety of situations, are like a customized pair of glasses through which we view the world.

Our View of the World Is “Filtered” by Bias and Assumptions

The collection of learnings and experiences that shape our perceptions gives us a subjective point of view—our own personal understanding of ourselves and others. A "subjective point of view" is the Random House Dictionary definition of bias. Bias is natural, normal, and unavoidable.

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Biases serve as filtering lenses. They enable us to make sense of new information, situations, and interactions based on what we already know and believe. Additionally, our biases allow us to make assumptions—to conclude that something is acceptable or true without actual proof or demonstration. Proof becomes unnecessary, because our assumptions are grounded in past learnings, experiences, and decisions.

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Our perceptions, biases, and assumptions can serve us well in many instances. They can help us develop and live our belief systems. They can help us measure our personal and interpersonal effectiveness. They can help us interpret new information, situations, and interactions. But filters do create distortions.

Problems arise when we allow our biases and assumptions to limit or cloud our thinking. Our perceptions do not serve us well when we forget that our scope of vision is also limited by our learnings and experiences. Problems can go from bad to ugly when we inappropriately judge others according to our own expectations and standards or reach conclusions about people and situations without a factual information base, when a factual information base is needed.

As a work-force diversity issue, those problems can become explosive when we find ourselves guilty of stereotyping, prejudice, and other “isms” that interfere with our understanding of and ability to work effectively with people who are different.

Stereotype or Cultural Characteristics?

Stereotypes are fixed or conventional notions that deny individuality. They are inflexible views directed at a group of people. Stereotypes can prevent us from examining our learnings and seeing reality.

Cultural characteristics are knowledge-based and provide a framework from which to understand more about a particular group—a starting point from which to discover reality. Cultural characteristics are positive and help us learn more about an individual. From those learnings we can understand how to work with or manage others.

If our frameworks become inflexible, prevent us from seeing reality, and instead lead us to seeing all members of a particular group as the same—with no room for individual differences—we will be blinded by the “labels” we use. We will be unable to see and value individual differences.

Prejudice...

The Random House Dictionary defines prejudice as “an unfavorable opinion or feeling formed beforehand or without knowledge, thought, or reason; any preconceived opinion
or feeling, favorable or unfavorable; unreasonable feelings, opinions, or attitudes, especially of a hostile nature."

One of the tricky aspects of this definition is the use of the word “unreasonable.” Unreasonable is a subjective word, open to wide interpretation. However, when prejudice—subtly or dramatically—influences what we say and how we behave with those who are different, we may be contributing to ineffective work situations that will sometimes smolder quietly and other times explode.

A critical aspect of the definition of prejudice is that it is about opinions or feelings that were preconceived or formed beforehand or without any conscious knowledge, thought, or reason. This means most prejudice is the result of early learnings and experiences that might have gone unexamined—and which likely need to be evaluated, with new, fact-based information brought into the picture.

...and Other “Isms”

Most people think of prejudice with regard to people of different races and ethnicities. In fact, within the context of diversity, there are many “isms,” including, but not limited to, racism, sexism, classism, ageism, heterosexism, and tokenism.

What all “isms” have in common is a regard for all members of a particular group as the same and in an unfavorable light. Blatant forms of prejudice and “isms” bigotry can include expressions of hostility and hatred. More subtle, aversive forms of prejudice and “isms” bigotry can include sympathy for the “victims” but, nonetheless, negative feelings of discomfort, uneasiness, or fear.

We Can Reduce Dysfunctional Stereotypes, Prejudice, and “Isms” Through...

What can we do to prevent our stereotypes, prejudices, and “isms” views and behaviors from becoming a barrier to understanding, valuing, working with, and managing today’s diverse work force?

...Increased Awareness

First we have to remember that stereotypes, prejudices, and “isms” are a result of the biases and assumptions that shaped our perception of ourselves and others. And we have to remember that biases and assumptions are normal and unavoidable.

Then we are ready to increase our awareness about our perceptions and what influenced them. The views we form early on are stored in our brain and are retrieved only by triggering situations or with specific types of people. We need to bring forth early learnings and place them under the microscope for examination.
...Education
We can educate ourselves about people who are different. We can allow ourselves to take in new information with an open mind. We can read, attend special events, participate in formal training, and seize opportunities to get to know people who are different—to learn about both the differences and the commonalities.

...Evaluating Old and New Information
We can evaluate old and new sources of information and decide which views to let go of, which to hold on to (perhaps, with some modification), and which to add to our belief system. We can continually expand our scope of vision and remember to use our perceptions as a frame of reference—as a starting place for discovering reality.