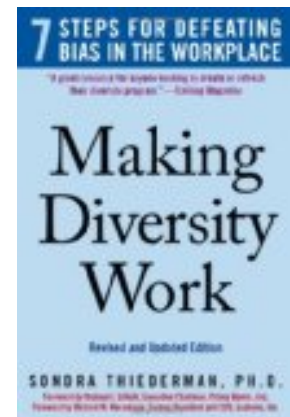


Thiederman, Sondra, PhD., *Making Diversity Work: 7 Steps for Defeating Bias in the Workplace*, 2nd Ed., 2008. Kaplan Publishing ISBN-10: 1427797137

Reviewed by Dr. George Simons at www.diversophy.com

It is difficult to count the gains and address the challenges both met and remaining in the diversity story of the USA over the past decades. Diversity started as the “right thing to do” and ended up as a “business case” for corporate success. Supported by three core US values equality, law, and market capitalism, the diversity venture goes forward, unfortunately, with mixed success.

Thiederman’s revision of her already highly successful book attempts to bolster some of the weaker areas of the diversity endeavor, namely in fresh chapters substantiating the power of reason and conscious decisions to reduce bias in both word and behavior. This is done in a context that admits to the natural functions of bias that affect us all. In other words we all have built in mechanisms that can produce bias and it is in recognizing and managing these mechanisms that we can reduce their effects on our working together.



Diversity experts such as Thiederman have long recognized that the management of bias and the effects of bias is a key element in the ability to offer equal opportunity and guarantee the productivity of a mixed workforce. It is the “how to” that interests us and is the focus of her book. In the US context of psychologized personal responsibility, this “how to” forms the core of what is in fact a self-help process. The seven steps for defeating bias outlined in the book are individual behavioral modifications. These include one of seeking out kinship groups, as it were finding or founding voluntary support groups, which are not unlike those constructed by psychologists and gurus for other forms of coping and self-development.

Lest the reader think I am trying to be cynical here, this is not the case. I am simply pointing out that how USians seek to do diversity is very US American in its cultural values and processes, as is to be expected. My interest as an expatriate trainer and consultant, working in cross-cultural and diversity initiatives in Europe and Asia, is to carefully observe the US approaches for both what they can contribute elsewhere as well as to discover what does not fit and may indeed become counterproductive to what we hope to achieve in non-US contexts. It is in that perspective that I review resources such as this with the hope that these comments produce some food for thought and fresh perspectives for the target market of the work as well as for others.

Thiederman is asking the reader (and hopefully user) of the processes in this book to enter on a kind of enlightened self development that is often in conflict with the current epistemology of the US public. We are living in a period in which opinion, thinking, and belief are largely the function of political and corporate storytelling that determines what our fears and our worries should be all about. Such stories frequently support and reinforce the biases about others that

reside in our unconscious. Thiederman is right on target in pointing out that our biases, the fearful stories we have been taught to tell ourselves, serve as a kind of “magic” for disappearing unpleasant and unresolved realities. Judgments about others are the inner Jeannie and Samantha whose antics take less effort than rational thinking about reality.

To examine these dynamics with the rational mind may not be easy psychologically or even socially as doing so tends to develop critics, whistleblowers, as well as the kind of individuals who can respond effectively to what Thiederman describes as “Gateway Events” in which opportunities arise to prevent or identify and reduce bias in action, but in which courage and—albeit carefully constructed—candor and confrontation, are required.

One could compare the advice in this book to the behavioral or spiritual handbooks of bygone years. The “spiritual exercises” in *Making Diversity Work* differ in one significant way from the bulk of advice found in spiritual resources classic and contemporary, which claim that the core of self management lies in developing the strength not to be perturbed by the opinions and sometimes hurtful behavior of others. “You make me feel,” is the victim’s leitmotif and in a society where the behaviors of others are assumed to be the determinants of how we should feel. In such a culture we are all victims, all entitled to take offense at what we perceive as or choose to believe are the slights of others that have made us feel one way or another. Not surprisingly a cult of mental and emotional damage has surfaced as a factor in US social and legal thinking.

Entitlement in the USA seems to have grown to include my right to feel offended as if I had no ability to choose how I should feel. Thiederman’s book is about regaining some of that power of choice. Obviously we have spontaneous reactions to what goes on about us and to what others do and say, but we also learn how not to make this the sole determinant of how we will react and respond.

Guilty or innocent? Early on the reader is treated to a series of case studies in which she or he is asked to judge whether the actors are guilty or innocent of bias. Thiederman does an excellent analysis of the nuances of each case and how given certain factors it might turn out differently. Judging others in a dichotomous legal fashion, however, is part of the US mentality. It also seems to be an underlying premise of the discussion of bias, which in many respects amounts to unfair judgment. What is not called into question is use of the right to judge, nor the sense of righteousness in judging others which, if unexamined construct a vicious circle. Thiederman looks at the dynamic of expressing offense from the perspective of “guilt tripping.” What is the goal of “laying a guilt trip” on someone? When is it justified? Is it vindictive or corrective? This is the same question that has to be asked of the behavior of those who impose a kind of scarlet letter on others via the abuse of so-called political correctness. Diversity training—and here I do add a touch of cynicism, having engaged in it myself for over 30 years—will never run out of clients if it fosters the mentality that it purports to correct.

How all this fits into the corporate story and the corporate story of diversity is not the topic of this book, but it is the responsibility of sound diversity management. There are such questions as: Is the cultivation of a diversity culture in fact the great leveler of difference? How is diversity “consciousness” used to suppress healthy criticism in a corporate organism? Is diversity in an organization’s corporate story a serious commitment or a marketing ploy or both?

Thiederman writes extremely well as those who subscribe to her occasional newsletters are aware. She usually treats us to a good story, and a good reflection on it.

Making Diversity Work provides two appendices, the first a sort of short summary guide that is meant to assist the reader to review and remember the basic attitudes and practices inculcated in each of the chapters, a kind of compendium or vademecum of what has been learned and should be practiced. The second appendix provides trainers with a set of activities that can be used to explore experiences of identity and bias and the emotions that are raised around them and support the learnings fostered in the book.

La Napoule, 1 August 2008