

**THINK YOU'RE BEING YOUR MOST
EFFECTIVE AND INCLUSIVE SELF?
THINK AGAIN.**

Sara Taylor

I have an assumption: we all enter the workplace every day with positive intent.

Are there some outliers? Yes, but overall, we all want to have positive interactions, be inclusive, and do our best work. It's not just my assumption. I've posed that question to tens of thousands of individuals in my presentations or training sessions, and everyone agrees that they have positive intent and want to create inclusion as they enter their work and interactions. I mean, who wakes up and says, "Today, I really want to be a jerk!?"

So, if we all enter the workplace or our community interactions with positive intent, why do we have any misunderstandings or conflict?

Because we are fooled by that positive intent.

Ever heard of the intent/impact gap? It's when our positive intent obscures any negative impact we may have on others—an impact of exclusion, bias, or misunderstanding. It's when we think we're much more effective and inclusive and less biased in our interactions that we actually are. And it's something that can be measured by cultural competence assessments. Unfortunately, between 95 to 99% of us have a significant gap between our positive intent and our actual ability to create a positive impact.¹ That means we think we're more competent and inclusive than we are.

That's the bad news. But the good news is that any of us can develop the ability to match our positive intent with an equally positive impact.

First, let's untangle the two. By now, most folks understand that intent doesn't equal impact. I didn't mean to hurt you when I accidentally stepped on your foot with my stilettos (intent), but your foot is still hurting (impact). That's easy to understand when it's as sharp and visible as a stiletto stepping on a foot or any other physical action, for that matter. But the intent/impact disconnect can be much more difficult to see when it happens in an interaction or a decision.

To Understand the Actions that Determine Your Impact, Start with Your Filters

If we want more inclusive, less biased actions with more positive impact, we need to go back to the source of our intent and our actions: our unconscious Filters.

Our Filters are an automated mechanism operating in our unconscious that determine our preferences, and perceptions. They explain and evaluate others and the situations we're in and then create our conscious thoughts.

Decades ago, it was Benjamin Libet, who discovered that our conscious thoughts are created by our unconscious milliseconds before we are aware of them.ⁱⁱ And those thoughts then create our visible behaviors or actions.

That means, every one of our actions—biased or not, inclusive or not, effective or not—originated with a Filter. (See figure one.)

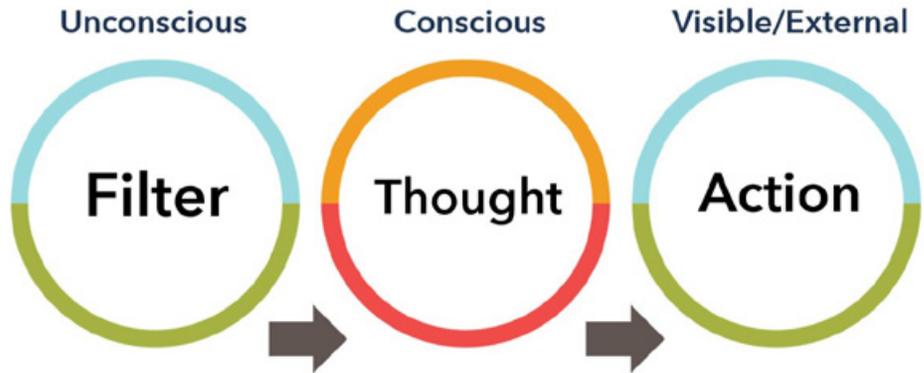


Figure 1: Filter, Thought, Action Processⁱⁱⁱ

In order to shift away from biased, exclusive and ineffective actions, we need to be able to challenge our Filters with our conscious thoughts. Yet, in any given moment or interaction, our conscious thought that can be passive or even skipped entirely. (See figure 2: Passive Conscious Process.)

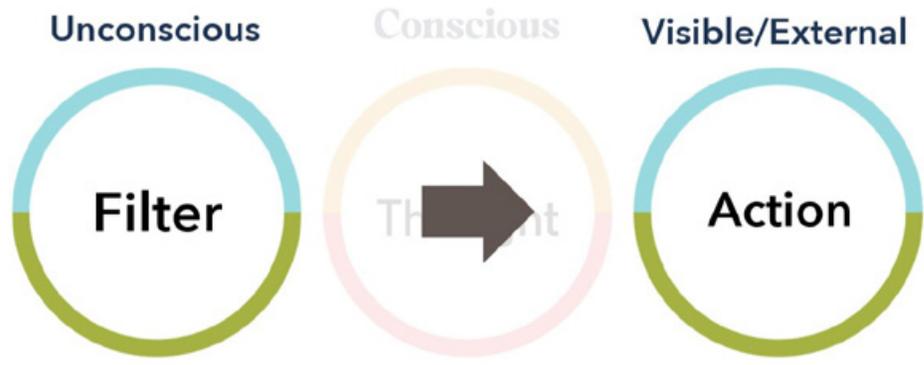


Figure 2: Passive Conscious Process^{iv}

Our Filters are so powerful that they can directly create our behaviors. This happens with rote behaviors; it occurs in situations of danger, but it also happens on a moment-by-moment basis when our Filter perceptions and preferences are so strong and our conscious ability to check and challenge them is so weak. Even when our conscious thought is there, it often serves as a feeble pass-through, a rubber-stamp approval of what the Filters have already decided. Instead of challenging the Filters, our conscious thoughts are more likely to confirm, or even justify them.

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A Misguided Focus

I see it repeatedly in interactions when things don't go well. We easily get into an ineffective, Filter-driven spiral. Instead of challenging our Filters, we defend and reinforce them by focusing on our Filter-created positive intent, "Well, I was trying to be respectful." Then, we go a step further and focus on what we see as the problem and what needs to change: the behavior or actions of others. "They were just so rude."

On an organizational level, we do much the same. We focus on behaviors we want to change and even dictate specific behaviors through policies or norms: address conflict this way or talk to your co-workers that way. All of this is done with positive intent, oblivious to the fact that those sanctioned behaviors are often a Filter fit for the dominant group and create a Filter fight for non-dominant groups.

Our positive intent fools us and misguides us to focus on behaviors. Focusing on the behaviors we want to change is like chopping off a weed at the stem and expecting the roots to magically create a flower in its stead. When our Filters are the root of our behaviors, we need to understand, recognize and shift them in order to get more effective and inclusive results. But the passive conscious process doesn't allow us to do that.

Unfortunately, nearly 85% of us operate in this passive conscious process with our Filters in full control, unaware of when biased information creates ineffective and exclusive behaviors.^v And that's not a momentary or situational reality. Instead, it is the result of our stage of cultural competence. In the lower stages of competence and effectiveness, our Filters are in charge. Only about 15% of us have developed to the higher stages of competence and effectiveness where we are first aware of our Filters and then can check, challenge and shift them to be more effective and inclusive.^{vi}

Filter Shift Process

That's the bad news, but the good news is that any of us can develop this ability. The developmental Filter Shift process walks us through the steps to first SEE Self, then SEE Others and finally, to SEE Approach. Just as any other developmental process these steps are sequential, and we must fully develop our ability in one before moving to the next.

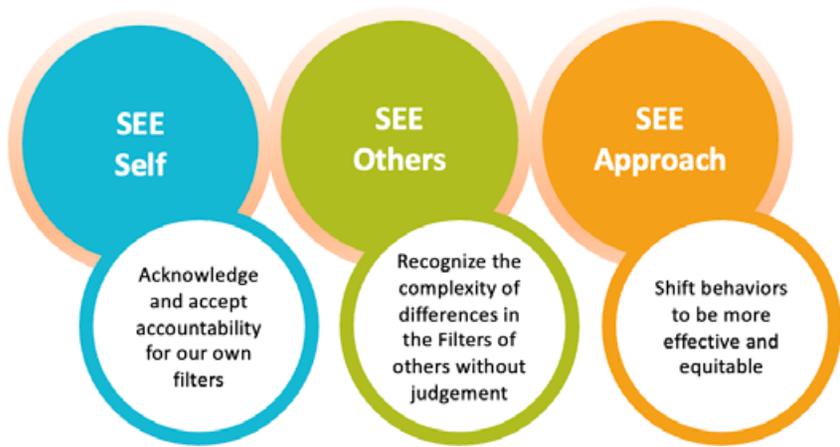


Figure 3: Filter Shift Process^{vii}

SEE Self

As much as we tend to focus on the behaviors of others, this developmental process starts with ourselves and with an understanding of our Filters, both what they are and how they work.

Through our evolution, our Filters have been designed, refined and fine-tuned to perform these functions:

1. Absorb: Take in exponentially more information than we can ever be conscious of (11 million pieces of information each second, yet we're conscious of only 40)^{viii}
2. Analyze: Make sense of the people and situations we're in by explaining and evaluating them based on the stored information^{ix}
3. Decide: Create our thoughts, perceptions, and decisions^x

All of this happens instantly, automatically and without our knowing.

Another tool for understanding our Filters is being aware of how they show up. There are three types of Filters (see figure 4)

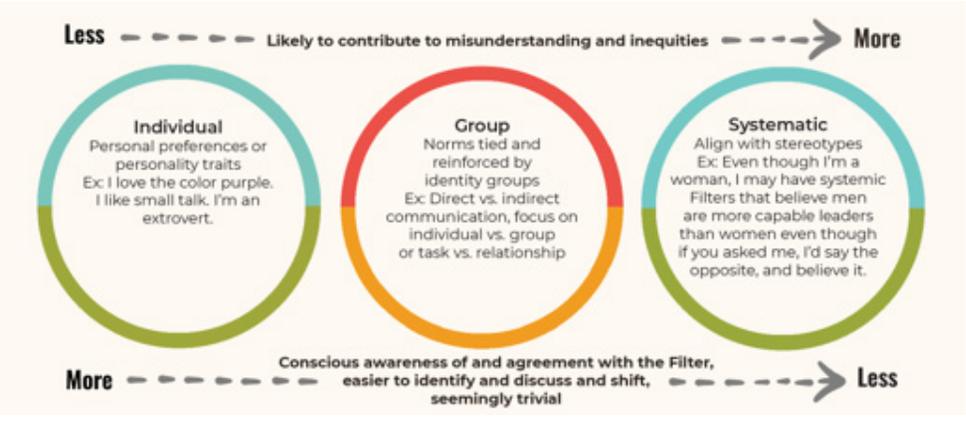


Figure 4: Three Types of Filters^{xi}

The three types of Filters are progressively more likely to contribute to misunderstanding, conflict, exclusion and inequities. Yet, they are also progressively more difficult to be aware of and shift in any given situation.

Individual Filters^{xii} are preferences that may seem trivial and don't connect to group patterns. For example, I prefer small talk at the beginning of a meeting, and my Filters will easily and more negatively judge those who jump straight into the business. Yet, the preference for small talk is an Individual Filter because there are no patterns of this preference beyond individuals. Commonalities in individual Filters are seen across identities and groups. As an example, you don't see that 90% of people who love small talk are White and only 10% are people of color.

Because we can be conscious of Individual Filters and because they aren't tied to any group identity, they can be easier to talk about and shift as long as we see them for what they are—Filter preferences that aren't good or bad but just different and relative to our past experiences.

We can also be conscious of preferences from our **Group Filters**^{xiii}, yet they are a bit more difficult to shift as we tend to attach more of a good/bad association to them because they are norms that are often taught and reinforced in the groups we are a part of. A good example is how we express our emotions in conflict. White people in the US tend to be emotionally restrained, while Black, African Americans tend to be emotionally expressive.^{xiv}

Our positive intent fools us and misguides us to focus on behaviors. Focusing on the behaviors we want to change is like chopping off a weed at the stem and expecting the roots to magically create a flower in its stead.

This emotionally restrained Group Filter is one that we see reflected in policies and practices across organizations, creating Filter-driven cultures that provide an undetectable advantage to those from the dominant culture that is a Filter fit. That's how Group Filters can contribute more to systemic inequities than Individual Filters.

Operating entirely out of our conscious awareness, our **Systemic Filters**^{xv} are the most difficult to identify and shift. Remember how our Filters take in 11 million pieces of information each second, yet we're consciously aware of only 40 of those? This is how the indiscriminate absorption of biased and stereotypical information gets in. All the while, our positive intentions remain oblivious to the stock-piled information—bias and all—just waiting to enter into our thoughts, decisions, and actions. They are Systemic both because they cross all identities and can contribute to systemic inequities.

SEE Others

Once I have a sense of my Filters and can take accountability for them, I'm ready to move to the second step to begin understanding the Filters of others. Let's start with SEE. The SEE in the Filter Shift process is not about ocular vision, but is instead an acronym for See, Explain and Evaluate, which is also a tool for identifying Filters.

Take a situation that didn't go well and describe it. If you're like most, your list will mainly include descriptors of the other person and their behavior. If the situation didn't go well, those descriptors will likely be negative. Take a look at the whole list and identify which descriptors were objective (See). This is what you objectively observed. "They said this..."

Even though these objective data points aren't influenced by our Filters, they are usually few, if any, at all of the descriptors listed. Typically, the majority of descriptors come from the Explanations and Evaluations of our Filters.

"That was rude." "They were so unprofessional."

Yet, if that other individual is like most of us, they are oblivious to their Filters, and have positive intent. That means their Filters drove their behavior and since their behavior is different from what I would have expected, they have different Filters from mine. Can I consider what Filters could have created their behavior?

SEE APPROACH

Remember, our Filters are the source of our thoughts, decisions, behaviors and actions. To shift our approach, we need to be able to shift our Filters and we do so by utilizing the active conscious process. (see figure 5)

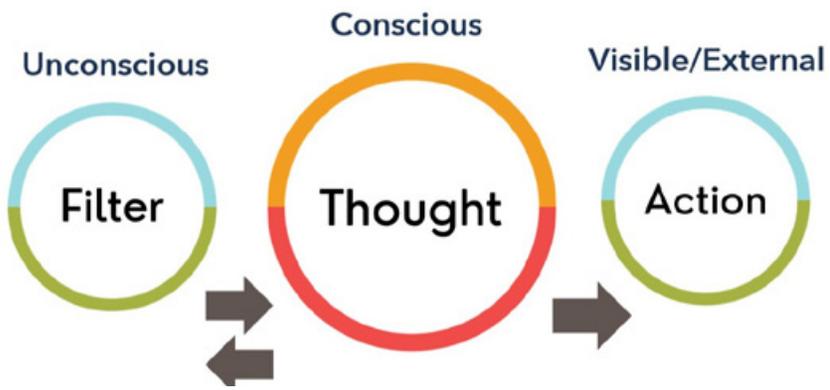


Figure 5: Active Conscious Process

Of the three functions of Filters, we can do very little to control what our Filters absorb, and we can do nothing with how they analyze, explain, and evaluate information. We can interrupt the automatic process when our Filters pass decisions, judgments, and thoughts to our conscious mind. With the Active Conscious Process, instead of being a weak pass-through to our actions, our conscious mind becomes an active guard, checking and challenging our Filters, separating out the explanations and the evaluations, and rejecting the bias and the stereotypes.

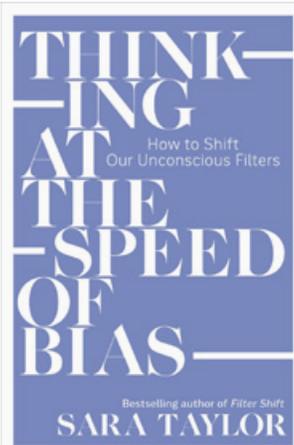
Essentially, we need to think twice, three times and even more. Think your impact will match your positive intent? Think again. Think you're being inclusive? Think again. **Think you're being equitable? Think again.** 📖

Endnotes

- i Wiley, Andrew. 2017. "Validation Analysis of the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI), ACS Ventures
- ii Libet, B., Gleason, C.A., Wright, E.W. & Pearl, D.K. 'Time of conscious intention to act in relation to onset of cerebral activity (readiness-potential). The unconscious initiation of a freely voluntary act', *Brain* (1983)106: 623- 642.
- iii Taylor, Sara. 2024. *Thinking at the Speed of Bias*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- iv Taylor, Sara. 2024. *Thinking at the Speed of Bias*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- v Hammer, Mitchell R. 2011. "Additional Cross-Cultural Validity Testing of the Intercultural Development Inventory." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 35 (4): 474-87. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2011.02.014>.
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- vii Taylor, Sara. 2024. *Thinking at the Speed of Bias*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
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- xiv "Resources | Intercultural Conflict Style Inventory." n.d. icsinventory.com/resources. Accessed November 21, 2023.
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sara Taylor is a diversity and inclusion strategist renowned for her visionary work in cultural competence. She is a nationally recognized speaker, best-selling author, and founder of deepSEE Consulting, which provides insightful consulting and strategic diversity training paired with measurement tools to build individual and organizational cultural competence. In July 2024, Sara launched *Thinking at the Speed of Bias: How to Shift Our Unconscious Filters* with publisher Berrett-Koehler to help individuals tackle their unconscious bias and empower organizations to scale cultural competence to transform their structural and systematic landscapes to become more effective and equitable. She previously authored the 2017 best-selling book *Filter Shift: How Effective People See the World*.

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