

Mindfulness and reflective thinking

Mindfulness means being aware or heeding, for example 'mind your language', 'mind the gap'. It might be argued that this level of mindfulness has resulted in most people being aware, for example, that racist remarks or comments derogatory to women are not acceptable in the workplace. However, remaining at this level of mindfulness can mean that such remarks get made when we feel safe making them, for example in a single sex or entirely white group.

Reflective thinking can be used as a means of focusing on our own thought processes - in the context of diversity, as a way of being mindful of the processes underlying our attitudes to others. As such, reflective thinking can be a valuable approach to ensuring that we are considerate and fair in our approach to diversity.

Using reflective thinking

All of us have prejudices. Some may fall into areas covered by the law. Others may not. They may come from our family, our personal experiences, what we read or what we see. We can be prejudiced for or against something.

We can identify our prejudices by using reflective thinking. This means the ability to reflect back on our attitudes, values, and behaviour and to think through our experiences honestly. Exposing prejudice even just to ourselves can be uncomfortable so before thinking reflectively about prejudice you might like to try the technique in a different scenario such as anger.

In conflict we feel safe and comfortable by blaming the other person. The problem is that anger and blame increase the chances of further conflict or resentment in the future. Next time you are in this frame of mind try some reflective thinking:

- Allow yourself to calm down.
- Make an agreement with yourself that you are going to reflect on what has taken place, that you will be honest and, if necessary, critical of yourself.
- Go through what has happened in your mind and rather than laying blame try simply to capture what has happened. Writing down your answers to the following questions may help you to keep focused.
 - Ask yourself why you acted or reacted in certain ways.
 - Ask yourself why the other person acted or reacted as they did.
 - Try to identify how you contributed to their behaviour.
 - Ask yourself what it was about the other person that upset or angered you: was it who they are, how they looked, how they behaved or a combination?

Once you are confident of the technique try applying it to prejudice:

Identify a time when, on reflection, you made up your mind about a person or group of people before you had even met them. Perhaps you decided what they were like based on what someone else had told you about them.

- What effect did that have on your subsequent experience of the person or group?
- How do you think they felt about you?

Practising looking back in this way will help you to become mindful in the present, at the time when something is happening. Ask yourself the following questions as you consider each of the scenarios below:

ASK YOURSELF

- What are you doing?
- What are you thinking?
- What messages are you giving yourself?
- How much of this is conscious thought and how much is not articulated, even as a thought?
- What messages are you giving this individual?
- What effect does this have on your role as a tutor?

- Imagine an obese person walking through the door to take part in a class.
- Now imagine that the next person to come through the door has an accent that differs markedly from your own. Take yourself through the same questioning process.
- Imagine that the next person is a woman wearing a hijab (head scarf). Consider the questions again.

We might not be able to eliminate our deep-seated prejudices, but if we can be more aware more of the time of what our mind is doing we can consciously eliminate unintentional bias in the approaches and decisions we make.

Mindfulness and reflective thinking can be practised. Once you have thought reflectively about your own personal prejudices run them through this questioning process. Be aware of all situations where your personal prejudices may come into play. Use the technique before you enter those situations.

Of course the person we are dealing with will have his or her own mind to deal with:

Think now of the people we considered in the scenarios above.

- What is happening in their minds?
- What might they be thinking about your reaction to them?
- How might you adjust your own behaviours to make it clear that they are welcomed group members on an equal footing with all others? |