Make better decisions by mitigating bias in processes

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NORTHEAST SARE
Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education

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WORKSHOP

Make better decisions by mitigating bias in processes

Biases exist. Everyday work decisions can be impacted by bias resulting in misalignment with an organization's vision, mission, and values. In order to make smarter and better quality decisions -- for you, your work group, and your organization – it's essential to recognize that when bias occurs, there are steps to mitigate it. Re-evaluating and developing decision-making processes will shift habits that will mitigate bias.

In this workshop, participants will:

- Learn approaches to shift habits to make unbiased choices in everyday work decisions.
- Begin to develop their own action plan to integrate approaches in their own work processes to mitigate bias.

" The key to making smarter, more effective decisions isn't stamping out bias entirely, but recognizing that when bias occurs, we can take steps to mitigate it.

– The NeuroLeadership Institute

> **Team-based practices can be redesigned to help identify biases as they emerge, and counteract them on the fly, thus mitigating their effect.** The NeuroLeadership Institute

Follow these steps for reviewing and designing processes and practices in your organization/office:

1. Identify where bias occurs most often in the process/practice.

2. Identify what categories of bias are in play.

3. Adopt mitigating bias strategies that correspond to the specific category of bias.

4. Use the approaches consistently and continuously in order to shift decision-making habits.

> **Once you know which type of bias you are dealing with, you can put the strategies in place and make more effective decisions as an organization/office.**

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My Primary Work Activities (that are in teams and group settings)

- Educational Activities

- Information Products

- Educational Tools

- Research

- Evaluation

- Meetings

- Grant/Application Reviews

- _____

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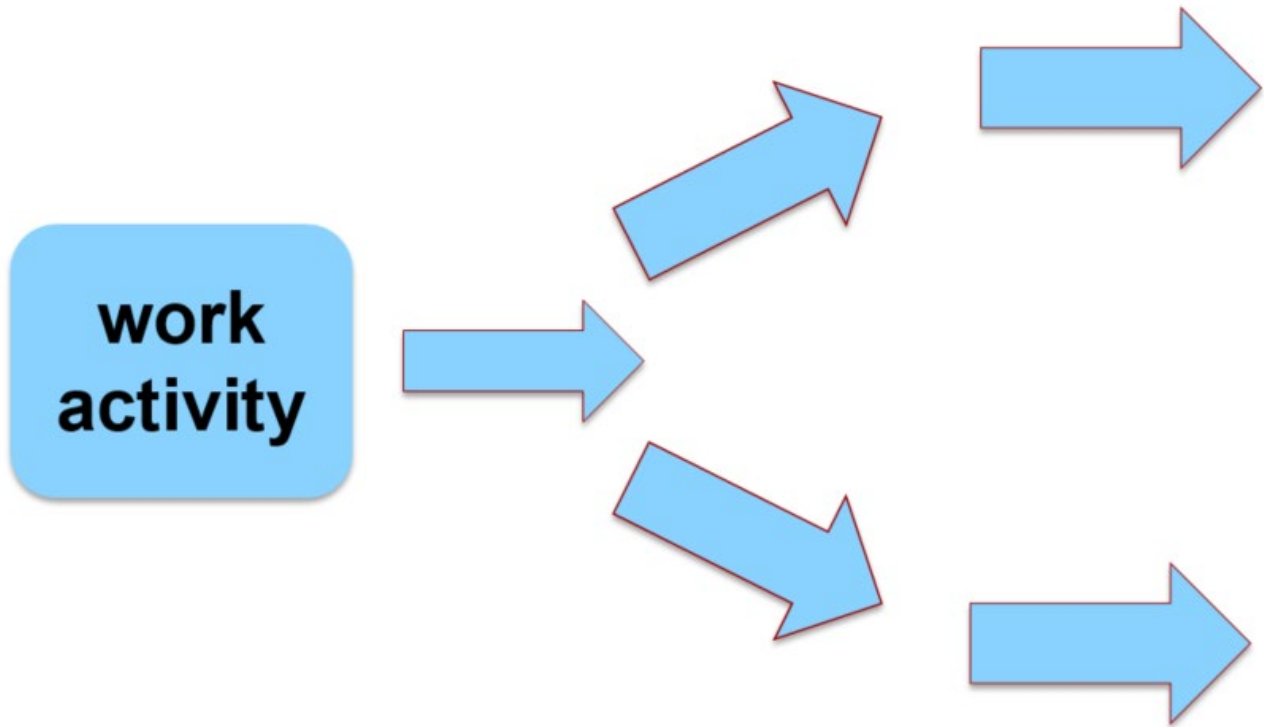
- Formal and informal **processes and practices for key decision making**

- **Identify where bias occurs most often in the process/practice**

But how?

1. Identify where bias occurs most often in the process/practice

There are some key moments to watch out for when biases can be most influential. Here are two ways to help you identify where bias is most likely to occur.

a. Pay attention to comments that you, your teammates, and group members make (better yet, ask someone else to pay attention and take notes).

Below are examples of comments that reflect biased thoughts that often show up at key decision-making points. If these types of comments are used, more than likely bias is at play.

Comment type:
Past experience is truth
"That's the way we've always done it."
"We've already tested something like that."
"It's already been done."
"We already tried that."
"There's nothing wrong with how we've been doing it."

Comment type:
Stoppers
"I can't think creatively."
"Nobody would go."
"We can look at that next year."
"Not everybody thinks so."
"There's no budget for this."
"How do we know it would even work?"
"That's just how things are."

Comment type:
So, too, very + adjective
"She's very reserved."
"Millennials are just too demanding."
"That's too disruptive."
"That idea is too crazy."
"I'm too busy to work on that."

Comment type:
Speaking for others who aren't in the room
"They are not going to go to that."
"We know what people want."
"Not everybody thinks so."

Comment type:
Something else needs to happen first
"We need to know if there's money for this first."
"We need to see what else is out there first."

b. Imagine different types of biases showing up in your decision-making processes.
Insert any of the above comments into your key decision-making points of different processes and practices and imagine how decisions would be impacted.

2. Identify what categories of bias are in play

The NeuroLeadership Institute simplifies the 150+ identified cognitive biases into five categories: similarity, expedience, experience, distance, and safety.

SEEDS® of Bias: descriptions and examples of specific biases in each category are below

Similarity *"We prefer what is like us over what is different"*

In-group Bias:
Perceiving people who are similar to you (in ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, profession, etc.) more positively: "We can trust her; her hometown is near mine."

Out-group Bias:
Perceiving people who are different from you more negatively: "We can't trust him; look where he grew up."

Expedience *"We prefer to act quickly rather than take time"*

Confirmation Bias:
Seeking and finding evidence that confirms your beliefs and ignoring evidence that does not: "I trust only one news channel; it tells the truth about the political party I despise."

Availability Bias:
Making a decision based on the information that comes to mind most quickly, rather than on more objective evidence: "I'm not worried about heart disease, but I live in fear of shark attacks because I saw one on the news."

Halo Effect:
Letting someone's positive qualities in one area influence overall perception of that individual: "He may not know much about people, but he's a great engineer and a hard-working guy; let's put him in charge of the team."

Experience   *"We take our perception to be the objective truth"*

Blind Spot:

Identifying biases in other people but not in yourself: "She always judges people much too harshly."

False Consensus Effect:

Overestimating the universality of your own beliefs, habits, and opinions: "Of course I hate broccoli; doesn't everyone?"

Fundamental Attribution Error:

Believing that your own errors or failures are due to external circumstances, but others' errors are due to intrinsic factors like character: "I made a mistake because I was having a bad day; you made a mistake because you're not very smart."

Distance   *"We prefer what's closer over what's farther away"*

Affective Forecasting:

Judging your future emotional states based on how you feel now: "I feel miserable about it, and I always will."

Temporal Discounting:

Placing less value on rewards as they move further into the future: "They made a great offer, but they can't pay me for five weeks, so I'm going with someone else."

Safety   *"We protect against loss more than we seek out gain"*

Loss Aversion:

Making a risk-averse choice if the expected outcome is positive, but making a risk-seeking choice to avoid negative outcomes: "We have to take a chance and invest in this, or our competitors will beat us to it."

Framing Effect:

Basing a judgment on whether a decision is presented as a gain or as a loss, rather than on objective criteria: "I hate this idea now that I see our competitors walking away from it."

Sunk Costs:

Having a hard time giving up on something (a strategy, an employee, a process) after investing time, money, or training, even though the investment can't be recovered: "I'm not shutting this project down; we'd lose everything we've invested in it."

3. Adopt mitigating strategies that correspond to the specific category of bias

Similarity

Strategy: Find commonalities and shared goals. *"We prefer what is like us over what is different"*

You can't change your bias of preference for the in-group, but you can bring more people into that affiliation. Pay attention (and bring your team's attention) to the goals, values, experiences, and preferences that you share with the out-group.

Example: For hiring and promotion decisions, remove potentially biasing information or features (name, gender, ethnicity) from formal materials. Even though people are aware of ethnicity and gender in any face-to-face encounter, the absence of formal written reinforcing cues can help. Instead, cue similarity: identify ways in which different types of people contribute.

Expedience

Strategy: Paint a complete picture. *"We prefer to act quickly rather than take time"*

Create incentives for people to challenge themselves and others, perhaps by identifying their own mistakes and foster a culture that encourages this.

Example: Break a problem into its component parts. Involve a wider group of people and get some outside opinions as part of the typical decision-making process, as well as implementing a "cooling off" period (10 minutes of relaxation or a walk outdoors) before making decisions under pressure.

Experience

Strategy: Seek other perspectives. *"We take our perception to be the objective truth"*

Example: Put systems into place that minimize the influence of personal perceptions and assumptions. Set up practices for routinely seeking opinions from people who are not on the team or project. Or revisit ideas after a break to see them in a fresh, more objective light, or setting aside time to look at yourself and your message through other people's eyes.

Distance

Strategy: Take distance and time out of the equation. *"We prefer what's closer over what's farther away"*

Example: Evaluate the outcome or object as if it were closer or further to you in space, time, or ownership. This orients you to recognize its full value. For a team that has employees who work in the office and others who work remotely, make a decision that all be on video whenever working remotely versus having some people on the phone, some on video, and some in a room.

Safety

Strategy: Imagine someone else deciding for us. *"We protect against loss more than we seek out gain"*

Conduct conversations that add psychological distance to the decision. Imagine that you are giving advice to someone in your shoes rather than making the decision for your own organization. Or imagine that the decision has already been made, and you are seeing it from a later point in time.

The mitigating-bias strategies can take the form of questions ?

> **To shift habits,** you need to **think about the way you and your team are thinking** and to **challenge each other.** It is possible to minimize the effects of bias by consciously understanding and spotting key moments in which bias operates. This results in minimizing their influence and allowing increased likelihood for objective (logical and creative) reasoning for decision-making to take place.
>
> -- Mike Pinder, "16 cognitive biases that can kill your decision making," *Board of Innovation*

Flip, reverse, remove biases identified by asking questions such as:

Who
- Who would we be negatively impacting?
- Who are we leaving out?
- Who benefits from this?
- Who is most directly affected?

What
- What message does this convey?
- What is another perspective?
- What factors/criteria are we using? Are they objective?
- What does that mean to you? What does that look like?
- What are our operating assumptions here?
- What is the best/worst case scenario?
- What is most/least important?
- What needs to change to make it work?
- What don't we know that would help?

Where
- Where will this take us?
- Where would this be a problem?

When
- When would this cause a problem?
- When has this hurt us in the past?
- When has this helped us in the past?
- What is getting in our way?

How
- How does this disrupt things?
- How sure are we of this?
- How can we make it possible?
- How true do we know this to be?
- How does this benefit us/others?
- How does this hurt us/others?

4. Use these approaches consistently and continuously in order to shift decision-making habits

Habituate the mitigating-bias strategies:

1. Use an "if-then" plan
Examples:
- If anyone on the team is going to work remotely/from home, then any team meeting will require everyone to be on video.

- If we are going to brainstorm ideas in our meetings, then we will follow the rule of doing so individually – with Post-It notes. This increases creativity, reduces the bias of the loudest people being heard most, and other types of expedience bias.

2. Use a "step-by-step" guide for making key decisions
Examples:
- When we develop any campus wide student program, we must first discuss how the program will impact our must vulnerable populations.

- When we review / create any employee management software, we need to assess it against our standards for accessibility, language, and gender identity inclusiveness.

3. Use preventative measures
Remove triggers to keep biases from being activated.

Examples:
- For monthly all-staff meetings, a department created clear participation guidelines to ensure different voices were expressed and heard. Such as: Raise your hand if have a question or comment; we'll brainstorm independently, then in pairs, then in the large group; at the end of each meeting we'll quickly evaluate what worked and didn't work to bring more voices into the discussions.

- The executive leadership team often fell into an expedience bias. They had busy schedules so they often applied speed to everything, including meetings. They then adopted a habit of pausing for 120 seconds at the end of any important decision, to think of things they may have missed.

Apply the concepts and strategies to your workplace activities.
Use the worksheet on the next page to write your thoughts and ideas.

In summary, remember to follow these steps for reviewing and designing processes and practices in your organization/office:

1. Identify where bias occurs most often in the process/practice.
2. Identify what categories of bias are in play (referencing the SEEDS® of Bias).
3. Adopt mitigating bias strategies that correspond to the specific category of bias.
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Making Better Decisions Worksheet

Work Activity:	Category of SEEDS® bias that is likely to occur in that activity: *Similarity, Expedience, Experience, Distance, Safety*	Strategy to mitigate that bias in that work activity:	Best approach to implement that strategy: *if-then* *step-by-step guide* *preventative measures*

NOTES