BRIEFING SHEET ON COMMON BIASES IN GROUP DECISION MAKING

Group decision making is a critical process in human organization. In this note we introduce some of the strategies that have been demonstrated to enhance the quality of decision making and avoid common pitfalls when making decisions in groups. The strategies mitigate biases in decision making by encouraging consideration of diverse perspectives and information sources and by relieving group pressures toward conformity. They are readily actionable strategies for leaders to employ to maximize their group’s chances of making wise decisions.

COMMON BIASES IN GROUP DECISION MAKING

1. **HIDDEN PROFILES** is a term used to describe when group members focus on perspectives and ideas that members share at the expense of contributing their differential knowledge and expertise. Decision making is shaped and dominated by common information to the exclusion of potentially relevant, useful private information. This bias in information sharing is problematic because leveraging the differential knowledge, perspective, and expertise of group members tends to enhance the quality of group decision making.

2. **GROUPTHINK** occurs when the desire for consensus takes precedence over the quality of the decision process. Overconfidence and pressure to conform leads decision makers to hone in on solutions too early and too narrowly in ways that eclipse alternative courses of action and undervalue contingency plans for failure. Groups are particularly susceptible to Groupthink when group members are similar in background and are isolated from other sources of information, and when there are no clear rules for the decision-making process.

3. **GROUP POLARIZATION** occurs when a group makes decisions more extreme than the values and decisions of individual group members. A central driver of Group Polarization is the desire to gain acceptance and make a good impression within the group. Group members tend to emphasize arguments that are in line with the norms and values of their group. Individual group members anchor on prevailing opinion. Some may take a position that is slightly more extreme to show leadership or alignment with leadership. Over time, these dynamics push the group towards more extreme decisions as the diversity of opinion narrows and members stop questioning one another.

STRATEGIES FOR MITIGATING BIASES IN GROUP DECISION MAKING

Following are some research-based strategies for mitigating biases in group decision making.

- **Before you meet, draw up a “Blind Balance Sheet.”** This involves asking group members before they meet to individually (and ideally anonymously) write down a list of perceived pros and cons of a proposal for group consideration. This type of individual preparation for group discussion helps to surface private information and differential expertise, as well as facilitate the expression of dissenting and minority perspectives.

- **Move from an advocacy orientation to an inquiry orientation.** An advocacy approach to group decision making is characterized by group members defending their position and striving to persuade others. Group discussion is viewed as a contest, with clear winners and losers, rather than as collaborative problem solving. When adopting an inquiry orientation, however, members remain open to others’ views, accept constructive criticism, and take collective ownership for group outcomes.

- **Encourage critical thinking as a group norm.** Entering discussion, encourage group members to engage in critical thinking (e.g., careful and thorough analysis, generating a range of alternatives, etc.). Research indicates that activating the expectation of critical engagement in problem solving mitigates social pressures toward conformity and premature decision closure.

- **Assign the role of “Devil’s Advocate.”** A Devil’s Advocate is someone who offers contrary perspectives, pokes holes in group logic, or questions group assumptions for the purpose of improving the quality of decision making. The role of Devil’s Advocate gives social permission for group members to challenge prevailing viewpoints.

- **Structure decision making to air competing views and protect minority perspectives.** Intentionally creating space for members to hear a range of views from people with competing perspectives helps to increase the impact of facts and values widens argument pools and improves decision making. Another way to do this is to ensure that the voices of group members who are not from the dominant group are raised and heard by the group. Sometimes representatives of minority perspectives (e.g., advocates for change) benefit from separate spaces to refine their ideas before bringing them to the larger group.

- **Keep private information “alive.”** Groups more readily raise and repeat “shared” information than individually held “private” information. Leaders must take responsibility for inviting and then reminding the group of relevant private information, particularly when that information is held by group members who might be marginalized in the discussion. One strategy for encouraging the sharing of private information is to ask particular group members to serve as “experts” or “memory cards” for specific analytic or information domains.

- **Conduct a Premortem.** A premortem is a technique for anticipating problems in a proposed course of action. It involves asking the group to start with the premise that the proposed course of action has failed, and then to generate and record possible reasons for the project’s failure. Consideration of potential weaknesses in planning or implementation helps to strengthen the quality of decision making.
Eliminating bias is a complex task. Both managers’ behavior and the culture of the organization that shapes the employee experience. That said, first we need to understand where bias is being felt. Secondly, we need to map, measure and mitigate the bias that have the most costly.

SCIENTIFIC FINDINGS:
As any professional who has experienced bias knows well, its impact can be profound and affect mental, emotional, physical and cognitive abilities at work and home. Feeling misguided on one’s professional potential damages productivity and commitment. Perception of bias can lead employees to behave in ways that cost their companies.

These lead to:

**BURN OUT**
Employees that perceive bias are more likely to burnout than those who don’t. They are more likely to feel alienated at work, withhold their ideas and lack pride in the company. Overall they are more likely to be disengaged.

**RETENTION**
Bias is closely linked to retention. Those who perceive a bias feel limited in advancement opportunities due to negative assessment of their potential. These employees are far more likely to start looking for another job, or want to leave within a year.

**SABOTAGE**
Science shows perception of bias also leads to reactions small and large that are intentional against the company. This may look like failing to follow through on a project or talking negatively in public about the company or on social media. In today’s climate with social media spreading messages internationally within minutes, this can carry enormous costs to companies. In addition, most corporations do not have the necessary processes in place to respond to these concerns in a timely manner, making this even more damaging.

**3 SIMPLE SOLUTIONS**

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<th>DIVERSIFY LEADERSHIP</th>
<th>CREATE A CULTURE OF INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP</th>
<th>CONNECT DIVERSE TALENT TO SPONSORS</th>
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| Studies show that we consider leadership diverse if there are at least 3 tips of diversity represented (gender, race/ethnicity, age, religious background). Diversity in leadership is crucial to creating an inclusive culture. Inherently diverse executives demonstrate that difference is valued at their companies. They are in a position to endorse ideas from diverse employees. They also provide a ‘counter-stereotypical’ expose for all employees, expanding their notions of who successful top leaders are, undercutting deep-seated biases. | In order to see the full potential of diverse employees it is necessary for leaders to foster a speak-up culture and not react on gut-based assumptions of unconscious bias. In this speak-up culture everyone should feel welcome and included to freely share their ideas and opinions and be confident that their ideas will be heard and recognized. In this type of culture, all individuals will be able to overcome the biases about them. Inclusive teams lead to 87% less perceived bias on teams and increase engagement overall of 59%.
(Hewlett, Rashid, Sherbin 2017) | Diverse employees need sponsors or senior-level advocates to lever them into leadership, effectively bypassing or negating the effects of managerial bias. Top talent is typically not sponsored equally. Men are 46% more likely than women to have a conscious or unconscious sponsor. Caucasians are 63% more likely to have a sponsor than people of color. Overall a sponsor advocates for their proteges advancement and sees their career as an important investment in their own. Sponsors have a highly mitigating effect on bias that employees perceive. With sponsors employees are 90% less likely to perceived bias, and 21% more engaged. |
Confirmation bias promotes various problematic patterns of thinking, such as people’s tendency to ignore information that contradicts their beliefs. There are four main domains in which confirmation bias affects people:

**WHAT IS IT?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BIASED SEARCH</th>
<th>FAVORING</th>
<th>INTERPRETATION</th>
<th>RECALL</th>
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<td>People search for information that confirms their preexisting beliefs and ignore information that contradicts them.</td>
<td>People tend to give more weight to information that supports their beliefs and less weight to information that contradicts them.</td>
<td>People tend to interpret information in a way that confirms their beliefs, even if the information could be interpreted in a way that contradicts them.</td>
<td>Causes people to remember information that supports their beliefs and to forget information that contradicts them or to incorrectly remember contradictory information.</td>
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**WHY WE EXPERIENCE THE CONFIRMATION BIAS**

There are generally two ways to explain why we experience bias. (Try to overcome your initial tendency to reject contradictory information and conduct a valid hypothesis-testing process)

**In yourself:**

1. Challenge avoidance – people don’t want to find out they are wrong.
2. Reinforcement seeking – people want to find out they are right.

Both are based in the same underlying principle, which is to minimize cognitive dissonance or psychological stress that we experience when we have two contradictory beliefs.

**WONDERING HOW TO AVOID CONFRIMATION BIAS**

There are generally two ways to explain why we experience bias. (Try to overcome your initial tendency to reject contradictory information and conduct a valid hypothesis-testing process)

**In yourself:**

1. Avoid forming a hypothesis too early.
2. Come up with reasons why your initial hypothesis might be wrong.
3. Process new information in a conscious and emotional neutral manner.
4. Slow down the reasoning process.
5. Standardize the decision-making process.
6. Create favorable conditions for optimal decision making.
7. Work with a coach to uncover your blind spots – we all struggle to notice our own blind spots and to objectively identify our biases.
8. Be consciously aware of the reasoning process – ask yourself are you distorting the way you process this information in an attempt to confirm your preexisting beliefs?
9. Understand the opposing point of view.