Cognitive Bias

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In dealing with complex social problems, leaders are often making decisions and judgments with the best available data—this may be too much data, too little data, and/or contradictory data. These decisions and judgments are made with all the pressures that come with making a contribution to a population-level result. By using ones' own experience and the collective experience of colleagues and team, leaders can take mental shortcuts in making decisions—these shortcuts are often unconscious and can be effective in keeping the work on track.

There are times, however, when these mental shortcuts contribute to or cause misjudgments or wrong decisions. Mistakes that lead to misjudgments or wrong decisions—the limits of ones' world view, social pressures, time constraints, individual motivations, and emotions—can be attributed to what scientists call *cognitive biases*. Slowing down, understanding that all people have cognitive biases, and engaging in thoughtful processes can help leaders avoid poor decisions and judgments related to the results work at hand.

The following table highlights a few examples of cognitive biases.

Challenge: Too much information		
Cognitive Bias	**What it looks like**	**Actions to Take**
Availability Bias	• Relying on immediate examples that come to mind when evaluating a specific topic, concept, method or decision. • Tend to heavily weigh judgments toward more recent information, making new opinions biased toward that latest news.	• Look at evidence, research • Examine the information: Is it valid because you have recently received it? Who from? Why did they give it to you? • Ask "who will benefit from this judgment?"
Anchoring & Adjustment	• Relying too heavily, or "anchoring," on one trait or piece of information when making decisions • Assuming a starting point and thinking about adjustments from there	• Use multiple perspectives • Engage in root cause analysis • Consult diverse sources
Confirmation	• Looking for supporting evidence that confirms your belief or point of view • Picking out pieces of data that make you feel good because they confirm prejudices, beliefs, mental models	• Recognize the pervasiveness of this bias • Examine all evidence with equal rigor and vet your sources • Be wary of overconfidence and use a

		Devil's Advocate • Look for contrary evidence and be open to alterations
Framing	• Mistaking your view of the problem for the real need. • Viewing a need in the real world as a "problem" along you can work on or have the answer	• Holding a results frame with a focus on a population level result • Engaging with those who may have a different point of view and seeking aligned contributions • Challenge other people's framings

Challenge: Not Enough Information or Meaning		
Cognitive Bias	**What it looks like**	**Actions to Take**
Guessing At Patterns	• Seeing patterns that don't exist • Quickly spotting the trend or the big picture	• Engage in root cause and factor analysis • Examine the prevalent mental models within a group or community • Use heterogeneous Groups • Use the power of diversity
Authority Bias	• Tendency to attribute greater accuracy to the opinion of an authority figure and be more influenced by that opinion	• Look for counter opinion – particularly those whose voices are marginalized or not inclued • Examine the world views and interests of expert or authority
Selective Perception	• Knowing what you're looking for • See things from our own personal perspective • Only perceives what you feel is right, completely ignoring the opposing viewpoints. • Organize and interpret events/information based on this perception	• Do the math • Intentionally get different points of view
Recallability ("Availability ")	• Assessing the frequency or probability of an event by the ease with which instances or occurrences can be brought to mind. • Inadvertently assuming that readily	• Test your Hypotheses and do the math • Carefully examine all of your assumptions to ensure they're not unduly influenced

	available instances, examples or images represent unbiased estimates of statistical probabilities.	by your memory. • Get actual statistics whenever possible, and avoid being guided by impressions

Challenge: Contradictory Information		
Cognitive Bias	**What it looks like**	**Actions to Take**
Status Quo	• Bias against anything new • "Business as Usual" • "If it ain't broke, don't fix it"	• Remind yourself of the results • Look for alternatives • Bring in different voices – particularly the voices of those impacted by the decisions • Don't exaggerate switching costs
Sunk Cost	• Treating the resources already spent on one alternative as a real cost of abandoning it for something better • Treating the resources already spent on one alternative as an estimate of the resources you'll have to spend all over again to start a new one.	• Listen to people not involved in original decision • Explore the “losses” stakeholders might resist if change is to happen • Reassign responsibility • Examine performance measures and other metrics
Cognitive Overconfidence	• Self delusion • Decisiveness • Refusal to be haunted by doubt	• Examine the sources of information you tend to rely on? Are these fact-based, or do you rely on hunches? • Identify who else needs to be involved in gathering and assessing information?
Risk Aversion	• Missed opportunities • Preference for reducing a small risk to zero over a greater reduction in a larger risk • "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" • Avoid probability of ruin	• Look for objective statistics: Do the numbers! • Examine losses to power, prestige, and/or competence that might influence decisions