

# The Perils of Bias

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If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

—Abraham Maslow

One of my favorite Dilbert strips depicts a meeting in which a problem is presented and each attendee suggests a solution that just happens to match his or her personal “hammer”—weighted cash flow analysis, and so on. In the final panel, a porcupine is sitting at the end of the meeting table and declares, “We must stick them with quills! It’s the only way!!”

Companies hire consultants for some combination of objectivity and subject matter expertise. The problem is, the two are somewhat at odds with each other. In fact, the more expert we are, the less objective we can be. Limited objectivity leads us to the doorstep of bias—an unconscious belief that governs our thoughts and behaviors. Subject matter expertise is the mother of all biases, and no matter how client focused we may profess to be, it can inhibit our ability to render the optimal solution for a client.

Consider the following situation:

Jane has been the top revenue producer in your consulting firm for six years. Her success is due to her passion for the special theory and methodology your firm is known for: value engineering. Jane has a problem with a key client account. They are threatening to terminate the retainer

agreement due to Jane’s strong bias for value engineering as a cure-all solution. The client has repeatedly and reluctantly tried value engineering in the course of a number of engagements and has not been happy with the results. They complain that your firm’s consultants position themselves as objective problem solvers but are in fact “over-recommending” your methods when other approaches would be more appropriate.

Sound familiar? Clearly, Jane’s bias has led her to great success. On the other hand, that same bias endangers your firm’s results and reputation.

This dynamic may explain why successful firms such as McKinsey & Co. prefer to build strong generalists as opposed to narrow subject matter experts.

Let’s take a closer look at bias to understand how it works, and how it can be managed.

## Bias at Work

There’s nothing new about the concept of bias. Philosopher Immanuel Kant maintained that the mind is not built to give us raw knowledge of the world but must always approach it from a special point of view, with a certain bias, to make it meaningful.

Here’s the rub: bias influences just about everything we do, say, and think.

■  
*Avoid being tripped up by your biases.*

For example, when we want to watch television, we aim the remote at the box and hit the power button without thinking about it. We've recognized the "TV off" pattern and know from the experience of countless times of doing so that pressing the power button will result in the "TV on" pattern. That unconscious belief is bias at work, the depth of which we become aware of only when the television doesn't come on. We're surprised, but we keep hitting the power button repeatedly until we're certain the television won't come on. When that doesn't work, a new bias kicks in: the batteries in the remote must be dead. When new batteries restore the cause-and-effect pattern, we revert to our previous bias. Only when replacing the batteries proves unsuccessful will we begin searching for another solution, and only when we've exhausted every known fix will we attempt a more objective problem-solving effort.

The good news is that most of our biases work in a good way. More often than not, they help us arrive at the correct answer and take the best course of action. Biases are a huge part of our intelligence, and we'd be rather useless without them. They help us rapidly sift and sort information into useful knowledge, according to whether it validates or undermines the strong patterns already embedded in our minds.

And therein lies the downside.

In my complex problem-solving workshops, I use the following exercise by former CIA analyst Morgan Jones to illustrate the point.

*Who Am I?*

- A new chief executive, one of the youngest in his nation's history, is being sworn into office on a cold and cloudy day in January.
- He was raised as a Catholic.
- He rose to his new position in part because of his vibrant charisma.
- He is revered by the people and will play a crucial role in a military crisis that will face his nation.
- His name will become legendary.

The vast majority of Americans will conclude that it is John F. Kennedy, and they will arrive at that conclusion before the third bullet. And they're wrong—it's Adolph Hitler.

What leads us astray and prevents us from arriving at the correct answer? Bias.

In this example, as soon as we recognized a piece of information as being part of a pre-existing pattern, our bias worked to shortcut our thinking—unconsciously jumping us ahead to a conclusion that seemed plausible and probable. It then worked as a mental filter, screening in any information that supported our conclusion, screening out any information that conflicted with it or led to another possibility.

Bias helps form our own unique view of the world. We're susceptible to our biases for three reasons: we instinctively rely on them, they're hidden and hard to identify, and we defend them subconsciously. In other words, we tend to see only what we believe.

Biases are especially difficult to manage, much less overcome, because they're outside of our control. We don't really play an active part in developing them; our brains do it on their own.

On the one hand, our biases—including our subject matter expertise—allow us to think productively and solve problems. On the other hand, they can artificially limit our ability to think broadly and objectively, in turn handicapping our performance effectiveness. At both the individual and organizational levels, unmanaged bias can be devastating.

Consider the impact of bias in the auto industry. Management consultant Ian Mitroff attributes General Motors' dramatic loss of market share at the hands of Japanese and European car companies to a decades-old, multilevel bias: (1) styling and status is more important than quality; (2) foreign cars are no threat; and (3) workers don't make a difference.

General Motors became aware of its faulty thinking only when it was far too late.

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in their organizations.*

Unless we learn to discipline ourselves to reveal our biases, becoming truly objective will always remain elusive. We will never see other points of view readily, even though we will claim to. When we say “I see what you mean,” we will really think “this person is nuts.”

So what can we do about it?

One answer is the fact that we easily recognize the biases held by others, which is why diversity in team problem solving is so very valuable. Another answer may be found in the work of Harvard’s Chris Argyris, who developed “action science” as a means to attack the suboptimizing effects of our biases.

## Reveal Biases

Grab a notepad and list three to five beliefs you operate under in conducting your business. Not easy, is it? Examining and testing our personal bias can be difficult without a good tool. Therein lies the value of Argyris’s exercise, which he calls Left-Hand Column.

The goal is to identify the thinking-doing gap created by our biases. In other words, perform a reality check!

There are two basic parts to the method, which is executed simply on a sheet of paper with a line drawn down the middle to create two columns.

The first part—the easy part—amounts to a first-person “he said, she said,” in which you reconstruct the actual dialogue of a recent difficult or unsatisfactory situation in the right-hand column. (Note: It should go without saying that the key here is accuracy—report what was said, not what you thought you heard, because that only opens the door for bias to interfere!)

The second part—the hard part—entails recalling and revealing your true thoughts and feelings in the left-hand column directly across from the actual conversation.

Using our fictitious consultant Jane, Figure 1 shows how she might use Left-Hand Column to work more effectively with her client.

The real takeaway from this exercise is insight and learning. Jane’s left-hand column becomes a visible piece of evidence of her

Figure 1. LEFT-HAND COLUMN, STEP 1

Right-hand column—Jane recounts the conversation:

Thoughts/Feelings	Words
	<p><b>JANE</b> I’m looking forward to understanding how we can add value for you in addressing this challenge.</p> <p><b>CLIENT</b> I’m just wondering whether this particular problem lends itself to value engineering. I’m not sure there’s a fit.</p> <p><b>JANE</b> I’ll know that better as I learn more. As you know, we’ve seen value engineering work in a wide variety of circumstances. I don’t know all the specifics, but from what you mentioned on the phone, it seems like something we can help you with.</p> <p><b>CLIENT</b> I think what I’d like to do is consider some alternative approaches before leaping into anything.</p> <p><b>JANE</b> That’s understandable. It always helps to get a third opinion. But I’ll be honest with you, there’s nothing out there that stacks up to value engineering.</p> <p><b>CLIENT</b> I have my concerns.</p> <p><b>JANE</b> Again, I hear you. But if the situation is as worrisome as you made it sound, the sooner we can do some discovery, the better.</p>

thinking and a means by which she can deconstruct her hidden biases. She should now use the exercise to jump-start a process of reflection: Why was I thinking this way? Where did these thoughts come from? What’s behind them? Why didn’t I speak my mind? What were the goods and bads of the thinking-saying gap?

Jane can also use the left-hand column to rescript the entire exchange and bring both the words and thoughts into alignment in the way it ideally should have occurred. By doing that,

Figure 2. **LEFT-HAND COLUMN, STEP 2**

**Left-hand column—Jane juxtaposes her thoughts and feelings with her words:**

<i>Thoughts/Feelings</i>	<i>Words</i>
I've got the perfect team for this project. This'll be the fourth engagement; this turning into a huge client.	<b>JANE</b> I'm looking forward to understanding how we can add value for you in addressing this challenge.
Are you kidding? What else have you got?	<b>CLIENT</b> I'm just wondering whether this particular problem lends itself to value engineering. I'm not sure there's a fit.
We're not the problem. The only thing in the way is your leadership team. They haven't been very supportive. They need you or someone to light a fire under them.	<b>JANE</b> I'll know that better as I learn more. As you know, we've seen value engineering work in a wide variety of circumstances. I don't know all the specifics, but from what you mentioned on the phone, it seems like something we can help you with.
He's stalling. Maybe he's contacted another firm. I don't want to lose this. Is it a budget thing? Is he playing lowball?	<b>CLIENT</b> I think what I'd like to do is consider some alternative approaches before leaping into anything.
Just like every decision made around here, slow. No wonder results aren't stellar; by the time they implement anything, the whole situation has changed.	<b>JANE</b> That's understandable. It always helps to get a third opinion. But I'll be honest with you, there's nothing out there that stacks up to value engineering.
Me too, about your competence as a manager.	<b>CLIENT</b> I have my concerns.
Give us some air cover for once, get out of the way, and let us work our magic.	<b>JANE</b> Again, I hear you. But if the situation is as worrisome as you made it sound, the sooner we can do some discovery, the better.

she will become more conscious of the effects of her biases, in turn expanding her thought process and thus her future consulting effectiveness.

On a final note, because bias affects all aspects of our life, it makes sense to pay more attention to it. So yes, you can use the techniques at home; you don't have to be a trained professional. ■

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