

Avoiding the Deception of Confirmation Bias

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Beware! A naturally occurring human tendency may be causing you and other leaders to limit your effectiveness. Having recently been fascinated by this phenomenon, I find the sad part for many leaders is that you are not even aware of this quiet but insidious limiter of your awareness. Because you don't know, you are not able to take intentional evasive steps to avoid the seduction of the dreaded but ever-prevalent confirmation bias!

"Confirmation bias" is one of many cognitive predispositions, all of which are some form of mistake in reasoning, evaluating, understanding, or remembering. The human brain is amazing in its ability to process information and comprehend concepts. Yet you and I exhibit irrational behaviors far too often. Why? One reason is that we hold tightly to our assumptions, preferences, and beliefs, even in the face of significant evidence to the contrary.

I see it already in my seven-year old grandson, who claims to love learning. Yet when I take the time to explain how something works or why a given action results in a predictable outcome, rather than being inquisitive and wanting to know more, his response is often a derisive "I already know that!"

Perhaps we can understand the folly in a seven-year old, but you also see it in your boss, don't you? Despite being so obvious to you, your boss insists on saying or doing something that clearly is detrimental in some way to him, her, or your organization. And even though you've tried to provide helpful feedback, the inappropriate behavior continues. Why?

Our brains are designed to protect and help us in many ways. They use shortcuts and assumptions to make quick decisions so that you can "get on with" the incessant decisions coming at you. This capability enables you to quickly accomplish many tasks (and is especially appreciated by leaders who value efficiency). However, affirming flawed perspectives and judgments, which happens with confirmation bias, benefits no one and can create far-reaching difficulties.

I started studying "confirmation bias" because proper awareness is so important in improving the skills and confidence of leaders. Further, the opportunity to add to one's understanding occurs so frequently that several years ago, I started opening my clients' coaching sessions by asking, "What new insights have presented themselves to you since we last met?"

An "insight" is a modified way of thinking that occurs through some new discovery (a paradigm shift or simply paying attention in a focused way). Since team members have extensive information about their leaders, I advocate that leaders overtly seek their feedback. Often, new insights happen because some brave person offers a piece of feedback to the leader that "connects" in some way and beneficially changes the leader's future behavior.

Confirmation bias inhibits your interest in new discoveries in much the same way my grandson doesn't learn as much as he could. You may not be as blatant about it as he is, but you don't typically investigate those concepts that conflict with your preconceived assumptions and beliefs.

As a leader, you should become familiar with the term "confirmation bias," observe the lost opportunity for insight when you see it in others, and consciously resist this natural deception in yourself! You don't like to think of yourself as deceived, but confirmation bias can be a severe (and dare I say sneaky) form of self-deception.

What can you do to minimize the insight opportunities you lose to confirmation bias?

First, teach yourself to recognize confirmation bias when it occurs. It's not easy, as the alleged "helper" (your short-cutting brain) does not knock on your forehead and announce, "Remember, I may be inadvertently deceiving you!" No, what happens often is that you don't look for what really "is," you are quite comfortable when what you "see" is what you expected to see. Your underlying beliefs distract you from pondering a potential insight that could significantly enhance your awareness!

Second, learning about confirmation bias will require more study than is possible to obtain from one short article. An internet search will reveal additional insights. (If you "go deep" into this subject, please share an overview of what you learn with me! Thank you!)

Third, consider rereading two chapters of Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. The chapters are "Think Win/Win" and "Seek First to Understand." We are predisposed to disobey the guidance in these chapters. We usually don't deeply listen to what the other person considers to be important, and so we miss insights that conflict with our preconceptions.

Fourth, aggressively work to create an environment where people are invited, even encouraged to tell you what they observe in your thoughts and behaviors. Granted, they may not always be right, but assume that they are doing the best they can to communicate what they observe. Direct reports especially are reluctant to give feedback to you for all kinds of reasons, so you'll have to be insistent, welcoming, and repetitious in your overt requests for their observations.

Finally, like so many other limitations you face, confirmation bias is easier to detect in others than it is in yourself. If you'll take the actions I suggest above, you'll see many other people discounting sound evidence presented to them. Learn from what you observe in the avoidance of others!

If you take this on as a growth opportunity, I strongly suggest that you engage a trusted colleague who will join you in the challenge. Educate yourselves together. Become a strong feedback provider for your friend, and persistently ask for his or her observations. You will likely experience a period of discouragement as you become aware of so much which has been hidden from your awareness.

However, rejoice with your friend that you are now able to consciously consider options for responding to situations you've overlooked in the past. You'll be surprised at new insights that present themselves and your ability to deftly handle situations that were difficult in the past.

You'll find yourself in interesting conversations with people you may have formerly discounted. They will offer ideas to you, sometimes intentionally and sometimes when they don't even realize it. A great adventure will unfold as you learn about yourself and others in ways that are deeply intriguing!

Dennis Hooper is an Executive Coach, helping organizations improve their quality and depth of leadership. Contact him at (404)-575-3050 or e-mail to dennis@buildingfutureleaders.com. You can find over 400 helpful articles on his website, www.buildingfutureleaders.com/article-archives.html.

NOTE: When I distributed this article, a long-time reader told me it reminded him of what I had taught him about how we humans tend to be on a "feel good" quest rather than a "truth" quest. There is a lot of validity to that comment. So please also read "On a 'Truth' Quest or a 'Feel Good' Quest?" which I published in 2009.