

REDUCING WORKPLACE BIAS: ATTENTIONAL BIAS

SHORT DESCRIPTION

WHAT:

Attentional bias refers to the fact that what we pay attention to, disproportionately effects our thinking. This can be as simple as the impact of watching the same TV news channel, or the influence of those we hang out with.

PROBLEM:

The world is a very big place and many variables can influence our actions. However, our attentional bias can disproportionately train our brains leading to the overvaluing of certain things and the complete dismissal or ignorance of things that should be influencing our decisions and actions.

SOLUTION:

This teaching and guided meditation will help you become mindful of where you are putting your attention. You will learn how to pay attention to a variety of different inputs (influences, media, people), not just the same old ones. Otherwise your attention will be blunted and you will be simply be brainwashed by receiving the same inputs over and over again.



Whatever you're attending to, will, for that period of time, be it a few seconds or much longer, dominate your thinking and become over-exaggerated.

This is why crises and stressful events can be so destructive, they dominate our thinking and threaten to change our perceptions and outlook.

It is critical, therefore, to be able to put the issues that currently command your attention into some perspective.

Focus and attention play a big part in the thought process. What you are attending to and occupied with, influences you simply by its presence.

“

Nothing in life is as important as you think it is, while you are thinking about it.

– Daniel Kahneman

Reducing Workplace Bias: Attentional Bias

WAYS TO AVOID ATTENTIONAL BIAS

There's no effective way of limiting one's attention and neither is that desirable. What is needed here is an understanding that attention itself can distort the perspective. The issue then is about keeping perspective not minimizing your attention.

1.

Ask yourself what are both the best and worst case scenarios of a particular situation. Try to assign a probability to the extreme outcomes. In short, try to avoid the emotion of the moment by focusing on specific issues like probable outcomes.

2.

Try to objectify the issue by imagining what your response would be to a third party who was struggling with similar issues. How would you perceive the problem? What advice would you give? Again, this helps somewhat avoid the overvaluing of the problem by focusing on specifics.

3.

Understand that attention provides a microscope through which you look at a problem and the process itself can exaggerate your perception of, and emotional response to, the object of your focus. In fact, a microscope is a good metaphor for the attentional bias. Attention exaggerates the problem, just like a microscope makes things seem much larger than they really are.

4.

Meditation and mindfulness exercises are, amongst other things, about controlling your attention and experiencing how it can affect consciousness. Understanding and experiencing the effects of attention and focus, therefore, is an important tool in mitigating the effects of attentional bias.

How do you weigh the different parts of your life, and balance them appropriately?

We have seen the effect of the anchoring bias, that initial thoughts about an issue, tend to over influence the subsequent narrative. The availability bias is even more powerful: what is mentally available to you will also have a significant impact on the thought process.

Reducing Workplace Bias: Attentional Bias

Attention, thus has a big influence on thinking and decision-making. The attentional bias is the tendency to be overly influenced by recurring thoughts. As an extreme example, people who suffer from Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), ruminate about certain things. This rumination becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy in that the more they ruminate, the more anxious they get, the more they ruminate.

However, you don't need to have OCD to be overly influenced by your thoughts. All sorts of factors come into play. Perhaps you're dealing with a crisis which focuses thoughts on specific parts of your operation. This preoccupation can lead to a tendency to over exaggerate the importance of a single operating practice because it has gained an emotional foothold as well as capturing your focus. Or perhaps the board or senior management are smitten with a particular idea and it garners far more attention and discussion, again risking the tendency for it to be overvalued.



To be an obsessional means to find oneself caught in a mechanism, in a trap increasingly demanding and endless.

– Jacques Lacan

As a leader, it is likely that any one time you will be preoccupied with one aspect of the organization's functioning. Be sure not to let that attention distract from other important issues that aren't in your focus right now.

Attention can also be hijacked by forces outside the work situation. A major news story, a family crisis, almost anything, can understandably occupy your thoughts. In a family crisis, for example, one might understandably be focused on how important your family is, elevating it above every other part of your life. This recurring focus might lead to an underestimation of other areas of your life, like your job and this could lead to decisions that are overly influenced by the family focus, e.g. quitting your job. Now the issue here isn't what are the important areas of your life, and clearly family should be a very high priority, the issue is one of scale. How do you weigh the different parts of your life, and balance them appropriately? This is where cognitive biases play a role by potentially altering the weighing of different factors relative to each other.

The attentional bias has implications for the important question of what you attend to. With so many different sources desperately seeking our attention, we need to be discerning about what we focus on, because it can hijack us. Moreover, when we focus on something that is not relevant, we are not paying attention to the things that are. Those important issues stay stuck in the dark background, hoping for the light, while less relevant preoccupations continue to exert a potentially distorting effect.



Adaptation seems to be, to a substantial extent, a process of reallocating your attention.

– Daniel Kahneman

Reducing Workplace Bias: Attentional Bias

MEDITATION

The control of your attention is critical because whatever your focus, it has the potential to significantly influence your mindset and your brain. Meditation and mindfulness practices are a great way to learn to manage your attention and how to effectively direct your focus.

It is important to be mindful of your attention. Where are you putting it? Why are you putting it there? What influence is it having on you? Where else could your attention be going that would be more effective?

Attention is the gateway to the mind. When you open the gates anything that comes through can exert a big influence over you. It can dominate the mental landscape and color your thoughts and reactions. So, make sure that you are careful about who you open those gates for. We don't need Trojan Horses occupying valuable space in our minds.

Nothing in life is quite as important as you think it is while you're thinking about it. Attention shines the spotlight on an issue, making it seem brighter and more important than it is.

While you focusing on something, you can't focus on anything else. It has your complete attention, until you switch your focus to something else. There's no such thing as multi-tasking, it's simply task switching.

Nothing in life is quite as important as you think it is while you're thinking about it. If you keep focusing on the same things, you are ruminating. Rumination can turn into worry and worry into obsession.

To be an obsessional means to find oneself caught in a mechanism, in a trap increasingly demanding and endless. Don't get caught in a trap of your own making. Don't distort your thinking. Don't train your brain to be anxious. Great leaders are aware that attention is a spotlight and a gateway into the mind.

Understand its power. Use it wisely. Adaptation seems to be a process of reallocating your attention. Your mind goes where your attention takes it. Great leaders make sure they take their minds where they need to go. They need to go to the process of adaptation.

Great leaders consciously direct their attention. They don't let their minds be hijacked by default. Your attention will decide whether you swim successfully or sink disastrously.

Pay attention to the important things but realize that the whole process of attention can distort. Great leaders are careful not to exaggerate.

Nothing in life is quite as important as you think it is while you're thinking about it To be an obsessional means to find oneself caught in a mechanism, in a trap increasingly demanding and endless.

Adaptation seems to be, to a substantial extent, a process of reallocating your attention