REDUCING WORKPLACE BIAS:
AVAILABILITY CASCADE

SHORT DESCRIPTION

WHAT:
The availability cascade refers to the excessive influence that seeing the same things repeated over and over again can have.

PROBLEM:
The availability cascade not only distorts our perception it distracts us from looking at other sources of information, leading to biased and misleading perceptions.

SOLUTION:
The lesson and meditation open up your mind to be more careful and vigilant about the dangers of being exposed to the same information and meditation helps increase your openness to different perceptions.

The Availability Cascade is an extension of the availability bias, in that for various reasons, similar or even the same information is presented through numerous sources, thus increasing its power to influence.

More sources and repeated exposure just absorb even more of your focus and attention. It's like the availability bias on steroids.

The advent of social media has exacerbated this trend with curated content, as well as the choice of your friends, both conspiring to keep the same information, or views in front of you most of the time.

It's not unnatural for you to surround yourself with friends and social contacts who have similar views. However, it's important to realize, that without exposure to a wide variety of views, you are likely to become increasingly single-minded and stubborn. This just doesn't apply to politics, it can apply to other aspects of your life, like your relationships.

For example, you are having a rough time with your partner. You tell your friends what's going on, in the pretense of getting help but what you really are looking for is support. Of course, you don't give an objective view of the events that are aggravating you, and as a result, all your friends support your view and opinions. (And there's a good chance you won't seek advice from someone who you think might see the situation differently from you.) As a result you get the input – and vindication -- that you're looking for in an availability cascade.

Here are some ways to counteract the effects of an availability cascade that can be very misleading and even led to major accidents and disasters. For example, the US intelligence community in 2001 was not culturally diverse.

As a result when they saw video of Osama bin Laden they didn't understand his context and symbolism, and as a result they seriously underestimated his threat. That's an example of an availability cascade, that when everyone thinks the same way, there's often missed interpretations.

WAYS TO COUNTERACT THE EFFECTS OF AN AVAILABILITY CASCADE

1. Do you want to be vindicated or do you want to be properly informed? If you're really seeking a clear picture of what's happening, you will look to a variety of sources, ideally diverse sources, for input. Proceeding in anything with less than a full picture and understanding of what's going on can end up being very costly, either in business or in your private life. Do you have the courage to face the truth?

2. Seek out as many sources, ideally independent sources, as possible, especially from experts and those who have experienced similar situations before. An expert, ideally, is independent and has access to, and understands, the variety of views on the topic. Such an expert, will typically not be one-sided in his exposure to the relevant facts and views and thus be mostly immune from the availability cascade.

3. Being open minded is critical and there's almost always other points of view. Just because you've seen or been told the same version of events or interpretations twenty times doesn't mean that it's right and that there's not alternative views to be considered.

4. Truly seeking clarity requires the ability to let go of the emotion driving specific agendas and wants. Meditation and mindfulness techniques can help moderate the emotion and thus become more open-minded.

> *Where all think alike there is little danger of innovation.*
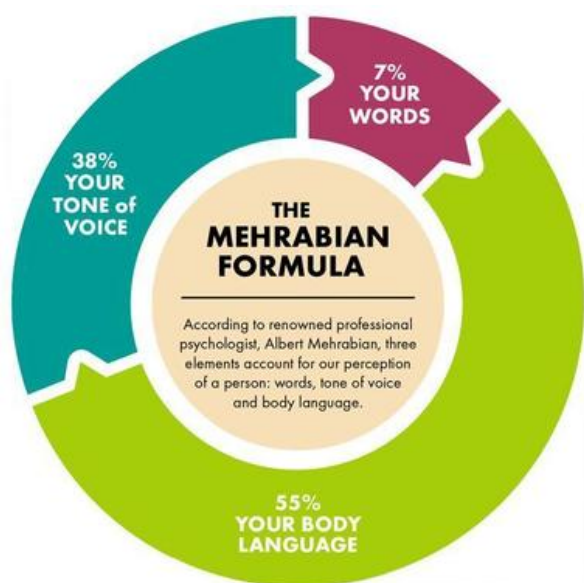>
> – Edward Abbey

AVAILABILITY BIAS

The Availability bias is a core distortion in which our perceptions are influenced by the available information we have been exposed to. So, for example, immediately after news of a plane disaster, people will question their willingness to ever fly again – at least while the disaster is still in the news.

AVAILABILITY CASCADE

The Availability Cascade is like the availability bias on steroids. It is described as a self-reinforcing process in a collective belief that gains more plausibility as a result of it being regularly repeated in the cultural discourse. This is sometimes known as "repeat something long enough and it will become true."

While that definitely applies in the main culture, it can also apply in organizational cultures, too.

THE MEHRABIAN FORMULA

According to renowned professional psychologist, Albert Mehrabian, three elements account for our perception of a person: words, tone of voice and body language.

7% YOUR WORDS

38% YOUR TONE of VOICE

55% YOUR BODY LANGUAGE

Mehrabian's study is a good example of the availability cascade, because it has grabbed a lot of attention and the results repeated endlessly, generally without context.

This often happens in the culture, but you need to ensure it doesn't impact your organizational environment.

It can happen a lot with wellness fads and psychological theories, with the availability cascade elevating a totally unproven idea into the latest pseudoscientific fad (see, for example, weight loss, skin care, astrology, etc. etc.)

It's important that your core concepts and key practices are informed by science and not pseudoscience and the latest fads. So, if you're going to elevate an idea by repeatedly using it throughout your organization, make sure that it has some credibility and is based on a good scientific footing and isn't merely a reworked infomercial script.

Reducing Workplace Bias: Availability Cascade

Do you know what the commonly held beliefs in your organization actually are?

Are there aspects of the organization that promote specifically held beliefs?

Are there vehicles in the organization, like newsletters, blogs, e-mails, group communications that foster the adoption of certain beliefs and ideas?

Are those tools disseminating accurate ideas or are they creating a group mindset that can be detrimental?

MEDITATION

The problem of the availability cascade, especially in an organizational culture, is that it can lead to groupthink, seriously limiting creativity and innovation potential. It can create a restrictive and limiting culture where all sorts of beliefs are elevated to unchallenged truths. It can also create a culture where there is resistance to creativity, innovation and change.

Sometimes it is more important to research what you think you know rather than what you think you don't know. Knowledge can be a dangerous thing, especially if it is accepted uncritically.

Knowledge is in a constant state of flux. It changes quickly, especially in today's high technology, hyper-communicated world.

Great leaders challenge the prevailing wisdom, including their prevailing wisdom. They know that at some point the prevailing wisdom stops prevailing.

Do you know the prevailing ideas in your organization?
Which ideas are based in truth?
Which ideas are merely beliefs that have no factual basis?
Which of those commonly held beliefs come from a misunderstanding of science or established facts?
Which commonly held beliefs benefit the organization? How do they do that?
Which commonly held beliefs are a detriment to the organization? How do they do that?
How can that situation be changed?
How do you contribute to your organization's, or any group's, collective beliefs?

A culture generates and creates beliefs and opinions. Those beliefs and opinions can and often do, shape motivation, productivity and engagement. Those beliefs and opinions can define your organization.

When all think alike there Is little danger of innovation. Are different views and opinions tolerated within your organization? An organization that fosters respect for different opinions and different ways of doing things is doing more than creating an engaged and innovative culture.

It is helping people step out of their own egos. It is helping people realize the limitation of their thinking. It is making people more open to the ideas of others, and other ideas. It is making people more tolerant as well as respectful.

When all think alike there Is little danger of innovation. When all are tolerant and respectful of other opinions, there is a massive danger of innovation. And connection. And engagement. And meaning.

The availability cascade can threaten your organization or culture.

When all think alike there Is little danger of innovation. When all are tolerant and respectful of other opinions, there is a massive danger of innovation. And connection. And engagement. And meaning.