

REDUCING WORKPLACE BIAS: BACKFIRE EFFECT

SHORT DESCRIPTION

WHAT:

The backfire effect refers to the fact that when we are faced with alternative views and opinions, we can use the conflict to become more firmly convinced of our positions.

PROBLEM:

The backfire effect can mean that we and others, become more closed minded the more we are confronted with different views. Alternative positions then don't encourage us to think more but on the contrary, think less.

SOLUTION:

The lesson and meditation will help you to see alternative ideas not as threats, but as ways to learn. Listening with an open mind, doesn't mean that you agree with a different viewpoint, but that you respect all viewpoints and don't impulsively reject them.



The backfire effect refers to the fact that when someone's opinions and beliefs are challenged, this confrontation can actually harden those beliefs.

We don't easily give up our opinions, especially those in which we are heavily invested, so challenges to our narratives can often have the completely opposite effect of the intention of helping others see things differently, and instead result in the hardening of opinions.

This speaks to the question of how to effectively get someone to consider alternative views.

The Backfire Effect speaks eloquently to the fact that attacking someone head on with a direct challenge is unlikely to create change but rather harden already existing views, a lesson that many organizations would do well to learn today.

One of the most famous psychotherapists, Milton Erickson, was a master at presenting ideas not only in a non-confrontational way, but in a manner that his clients would eagerly embrace on their own terms. He recognized that an attack almost always elicits a defensive reaction.

There are two sides to this question. The first is how not to slide automatically into a defensive, hardened position. But perhaps the more important second issue, is how not to create a backfire effect in others through an ill-considered approach.

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WAYS TO AVOID INDUCING THE BACKFIRE EFFECT IN OTHERS

1.

Don't be confrontational or disrespectful. If you are either of those things your approach will be dismissed and people will automatically associate your confrontation with a weak position. They will also be angry, and they will certainly not change a view or opinion when they are mad at you.

The goal is to get the other person to reach the conclusion you want, on their own and certainly not through force.

2.

This involves meeting people where they are at, which means showing understanding of their views, but introducing subtle differences that are not completely incompatible with their core view but will hopefully make them think about the subtleties involved in their thoughts and ideas.

Once this process has begun, you have got them thinking critically about their opinions and views, which is the object of the exercise.

3.

Find common ground. Even when you seem far apart you might well agree on some underlying principles even if you differ on how to manifest those core principles.

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Do not dwell in the past, do not dream of the future, concentrate the mind on the present moment.

– Buddha

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You only lose what you cling to.

– Buddha

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WAYS TO AVOID SLIPPING INTO AN AUTOMATIC AND HARDENED DEFENSE OF YOUR POSITION

1.

An emotional, impulsive reaction won't convince anyone that your opinion is right. On the contrary, an impulsive defense will be seen as just that – impulsive – and will probably not convince neutrals that you are thinking critically.

As a result, even if you feel the urge to jump to your defense, the calmer and more rational you are, the more convincing you will appear.

2.

While emotionalism, bluster and attack have become common ways of defending a position, they typically do not convert others to your views. If anything they turn neutrals off.

3.

Mindfulness and meditation once again allow you to manage your emotions and appear, and be, in control.

A testimony to how reluctantly we typically change our minds can be found in both the **Backfire Effect** and the **Continued Influence Effect**. These are similar responses to getting disconfirming evidence about a currently held view or opinion.

Cognitive biases definitely come into play when our opinions and beliefs are threatened and these biases are great examples of the fact that we are very reluctant to let go of ideas in which we are invested.

Now, a rational person confronted with data that shows an existing opinion is flawed, would hopefully give serious consideration to the new information and consider all realistic explanations.

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Entrepreneurship requires an unvanquished spirit of curiosity, an openness to learning, a letting go of OldCo so you're free to create NewCo.

– Michael Gerber

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If your plan to increase sales doesn't seem to be working, a rational approach would be to try to understand the reasons behind the disappointing numbers.

There would be some, however, who would not like the emotional discomfort of having to revisit a favorite plan and they would go to great lengths to defend it. This means finding some way of discrediting or downplaying the existing information. For example, one could find fault with the accounting, or find other reasons why the sales are down, like poor weather, or some other excuse.

Not only can you minimize the data and defend your position, the very defense of that opinion will lead to a strengthening of it, hence the backfire effect. The more you have to defend your position the stronger you will believe in it and the more you will be committed to it.



This is actually why challenging someone head on about their beliefs often fails to produce any change: the defense thus aroused increases their commitment to their position. This is precisely why communication strategies around change and transformation are so critical – and often misguided.

Even when there is a certain acceptance of data that disproves or discredits an opinion, there is still the chance that people will hang on to that opinion, despite the fact that it has been disproved. While that opinion might not be as valued as it was before, it still continues to have influence consciously or otherwise.

So, while the specifics of a discredited approach might be given up, the general inferences inherent in the opinion might continue to be embraced and influence subsequent thoughts, as in the *continued influence effect*.

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MEDITATION

There is a tendency to cling on to ideas and concepts that have served you well in the past, or you believe have served you well in the past. There comes a time, however, to review cherished thinking habits and practices, to determine whether they have outlived their usefulness.

The value of many ideas depends on context and operating conditions. There was a time when having a human operator answer incoming calls was an obvious essential. With automation, that has changed. There was a time when strict authoritarian control characterized great business leaders, but now that idea has been turned on its head.

Always make the time to review your prevailing and treasured philosophies and practices. One day they will be obsolete. Has their time already come? Do you still cling onto ideas and practices that have become obsolete? Has their time come?

“Do not dwell in the past, do not dream of the future, concentrate the mind on the present moment.”

What matters most is whether your ideas and practices make sense in the present moment.
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Letting go can be difficult. However, you have to let go if you are going to adapt. You have to let go, if you are going to be creative. You have to let go if you are going to innovate. Letting go is liberating. Letting go is about living in the present. Letting go is to avoid being a slave to your past.

A certain idea or practice may have taken you far, but it might not be able to take you on the next part of your journey. Appreciate it and respect but everything has its time. Don't use it to the point where it fails you.

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Entrepreneurship requires an unvanquished spirit of curiosity, an openness to learning, a letting go of OldCo so you're free to create NewCo..

Great leaders are curious. Great leaders are open to learning. Great leaders are adept at letting go of the old and becoming free to create the new.

Be courageous enough to challenge everything. Be smart enough to challenge everything. Be daring enough to challenge everything.

You only lose what you cling to. You only lose because you cling to. Great leaders don't cling. Great leaders are adept at letting go of the old and becoming free to create the new.

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