

REDUCING WORKPLACE BIAS: HALO EFFECT

SHORT DESCRIPTION

WHAT:

The Halo Effect comes about when we overgeneralize one of a person's positive characteristics and assume they are wonderful in other areas of life.

PROBLEM:

The Halo Effect can set up us for disappointment as nobody is perfect and it can lead to the uncritical acceptance of ideas and opinions that we might not otherwise endorse.

SOLUTION:

The lesson and meditation not only increase your awareness of the Halo Effect and its dangers, they will also help you spot positive overgeneralizations and help you be more realistic in your appraisal of others.



The Halo Effect is the tendency to overgeneralize someone's good qualities, which can lead to a falsely inflated vision of the person in question. This can lead to disappointment as well as unrealistic expectations.

The mind uses a lot of shortcuts to save energy. As a result, our perceptions are often based on false generalizations and stereotypes.

We can often conflate and confuse excellence in one personal attribute and ascribe it to other qualities when there is no evidence that is the case whatsoever.

Actually, these confusions occur precisely when there is a paucity of evidence about someone's range of skills and behaviors. One of the most common examples of the halo effect refers to physically attractive people.

Physically attractive people of both genders are often seen as smarter, more successful and more sociable than less attractive counterparts and these qualities are often overstated. In addition to assumptions and stereotyping, there are other variables that influence the perception of someone's qualities.

If you like a person, you're more likely to overgeneralize their positive attributes. This is because the positive emotion that accompanies thoughts of the person requires cognitive justification. So, the more you like someone, the more you'll attribute overly positive qualities.

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Consider romantic love, especially the first few months of a relationship, when your love interest can do no wrong and is almost perfect. Over time, reality breaks down these justifications and you start to see the real attributes of the person. That's when the relationship really begins.

ONE HELPFUL WAY OF KEEPING FROM MAKING TOO MANY UNREALISTIC ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT A PERSON IS TO LOOK AT THE DIFFERENT AREAS OF LIFE.

These would include Intelligence, Skills, Appearance, Character, Values, and Sociability.

Based on your knowledge of the person, rate them on each of those variables from 1 to 5 where 1=low, 2=moderately low, 3=average, 4=above average, 5= well above average.

Often the simple task of trying to actually evaluate the evidence helps knock down assumptions that are not objective and often based on fantasy. This is important. Nobody is perfect but many people have a lot of good characteristics.

It's far better to be realistic about someone you consider to have a lot of good qualities than unrealistic about someone you think is perfect and can do no wrong.

Overestimation of someone can lead to them having too much influence and power, which might well not be good for you or your organization.



A lot of companies have nice-sounding cultural values like integrity, respect, and excellence, but if those values don't map to specific behaviors, then they quickly get lost. Instead, we see what's called a 'halo effect' where leaders tend to overvalue certain attributes and undervalue others.

– Peggy Johnson

The brain works to maximize its energy. As a result, the mind's default setting is to simplify everything as much as possible, leading us to perceive the world via shortcuts and knee jerk responses. One way this manifests is the Halo Effect.

The Halo Effect works by taking some of what we know about a person and generalizing that information to every aspect of their being. So, if we think of someone as smart, we tend to attribute other positive characteristics to that person, even in the absence of any evidence, especially in the absence of any evidence. For example, physically attractive people are judged as smarter and more sociable than less attractive individuals.

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This can turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy. You like someone on first meeting and begin to project on to them all manner of other positive characteristics that are a reflection of your need for consistency and not necessarily anything to do with the other person's attributes. In the early infatuation stages of love, this perception reigns supreme. Your new found love can do no wrong and is perfect. However, that is a perception that can not stand the test of time because no one is that perfect!

The Halo Effect is testament to how much we generalize our perceptions about people from very limited knowledge. This can work to exaggerate purportedly 'good' or 'bad' first impressions. If the only thing you know about a person is that they were fired from their previous job, it will anchor your perceptions.

Wisdom is recognizing the severe limitations and inherent injustice of the halo effect. Unfortunately, first impressions are hard to shake and will continue to influence your narrative (see Anchoring). However, the height of wisdom is the recognition of what you don't know and not giving into the default setting of generalizing from very limited pieces of knowledge (which may or may not be accurate and are certainly very simplified).

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If people are failing, they look inept. If people are succeeding, they look strong and good and competent. That's the 'halo effect.' Your first impression of a thing sets up your subsequent beliefs. If the company looks inept to you, you may assume everything else they do is inept.

– Daniel Kahneman

As a leader, the halo effect can manifest in a number of ways. You might attract such a perception. On the one hand it is nice to be seen in an exaggeratedly positive way as that can enhance your influence. On the other hand, unrealistic expectations also set you up disappointing others, which can be problematic.

In addition, a leader might very well have their favorite confidantes and colleagues in the board room and amongst the senior executives, and this can make you overvalue their opinions and not see some of the flaws in their thinking.

Or, a new candidate for a senior position is described in glowing terms by someone in HR. Your first thought might be. “He sounds amazing!”

It's not the first thought that comes to your mind that is the important one. It is the second, third, fourth and fifth ones, but especially the second one which should always be questioning your first knee-jerk, simplistic response.

In this case that second thought should be something like this. Well, he obviously made an impression on HR. I wonder what he is really like.”

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The Halo Effect that would be justified is the halo over your head whenever you effectively challenge those knee jerk generalizations about someone whom you really don't know. Great leaders don't overvalue generalizations, even good ones.

Do you think that you overvalue people based on the Halo Effect? If, so who are they?

Do you think that you undervalue people based on the Halo Effect? If so, who are they?

A good leaders' mantra: I shouldn't judge people at all but I certainly cannot judge people based on very limited knowledge.

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We all romanticize the people we adore.

– John Green

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MEDITATION

The Halo effect is a testament to our need for consistency. It's almost as if the pleasure we feel when contemplating someone's strengths inoculates us against seeing their weaknesses. We want to bask in the glory and we don't want to dilute that feeling. It's way less confusing when people fall into simple categories. Our feelings are hard to scale and it is so much easier if we see people as all one thing or another and nothing in between.

We all romanticize people we adore. As you relax and let go of the need for classification, appreciate that perceiving people as a variety of different talents and imperfections is the greatest honor you can give them – and yourself. Do not give into the need for simplicity. Resist and see the people around you as they really are – complex and diverse.

We all romanticize people we adore. See yourself first – your many strengths and the ways you need to improve. If you focus on a strength does that mean your weaknesses all disappear? If you focus on a weakness, does that mean you have no strength? Embrace your complexity, so you can embrace the complexity of others.

Great leaders don't romanticize the people they adore. Great leaders don't demonize the people they dislike. But, you don't have to follow the path of simplicity. The path of simplicity leads into the woods of ignorance. Woods so thick that you are blind to the light. Seek the light of the truth, not simplicity.

When you adore someone based on the need for simplicity you are setting them up to fail. The pedestal you have put them on is so high, that if they falter –when they falter -- they cannot help but come crashing to the ground.

Great leaders know that moderation is needed in all things, including perceptions. Don't allow yourself to be fooled into extreme judgments. The more extreme your judgment, the more incorrect and damaging it will turn out to be. Moderation is needed in all things, especially your perception of others.

Great leaders appreciate kindness, charity, and love but don't assume that they are universal behaviors for the person showing you that kindness, charity and love. As you know that person more, you will be able to much more accurately perceive them and their authentic motivations.

Great leaders know that making hasty judgments only emphasizes ignorance. Open your mind to complexity. Rise above snap judgments and generalizations, even if they are pleasing. – especially if they are pleasing. Great leaders open their minds to complexity.

When your mind presents a fast judgment to you, challenge it. Anything that quick and automatic must be flawed. It's not the truth, but a function of habit. You would not want someone to be so knee jerk in their reactions to you. You would want them to realize context, your complexity, and not set you up to fail through false assumptions and generalizations – no matter how nice they may be or good they make you feel.

Great leaders know that the problem with making hasty judgments is that it only emphasizes ignorance. Great leaders open their minds to complexity.