

REDUCING WORKPLACE BIAS: SHARED INFORMATION BIAS

SHORT DESCRIPTION

WHAT:

The Shared Information Bias describes the tendency of leaders to only discuss information that everyone is aware of, rather than information that only some may be familiar with.

PROBLEM:

The shared information bias can reduce the effectiveness of communication, creativity and team work.

SOLUTION:

The lesson and meditation highlight the importance of sharing information with team mates and consulting for effective leadership and provide tools to remind leaders that sharing is critical for trust and authenticity.



The shared information bias is the tendency for groups to spend more time and more intense focus on discussing shared information of which everyone in the group is aware. This can have a critical impact on the quality of decisions and the efficacy of any subsequent actions.

There could be several reasons why information remains unshared which include confidentiality, political dynamics, and office politics. And there is probably a natural tendency to focus in a group setting on what is known by all group members.

Common knowledge is a common denominator, and the focus on common understanding and knowledge is a natural bias that serves group dynamics. However, that doesn't make it immune from the error introduced by bias.

There may be some occasions where it is not prudent to share some critical information, in which case one has to prioritize one's decisions. For example, during World War 2 Britain's Prime Minister Winston Churchill got advanced warning of a Luftwaffe attack on the British city of Coventry.

However, he opted not to provide any advance warning or act on the intelligence information because it had been gained by cracking the German code. Any advanced preparations or warnings would have tipped off the Nazis that their code had been hacked.

So, Churchill opted not to do anything that would tip the Germans off about their hacked code. He had to prioritize which information could be shared and which could not.

Reducing Workplace Bias: Confirmation Bias

THERE ARE SEVERAL WAYS OF MINIMIZING THE OCCURRENCE AND THE IMPACT OF THE SHARED INFORMATION BIAS.

1.

In a group setting ensure that everyone knows as much of the relevant material as possible and are at least exposed to it in the decision-making process. There may be sensitive material around the subject and you will have to prioritize which is more important before deciding to share what might be sensitive information.

2.

There may be all sorts of material that are key to an effective discussion; technical, organizational, financial, etc. Given that collective knowledge seems to potentially drive the discussion, consider ways in which that information could be shared prior to decision-making.

3.

If you do have to withhold information, try to determine what impact the availability of such information might have had on the decision-making process. And in similar vain, how the lack of information might have influenced the thinking in the group and subsequent choices.

Good communication is an essential for any individual or organizational success. However, effective communication is not always easy to implement for a variety of reasons that include personal issues, interpersonal dynamics, the environment and so on. There are several biases that impact the quality of communication, and specifically the sharing of information.

Now, obviously not all information needs to be shared with everyone in the organization. However, in a decision-making process, the major players ideally need to know the main factors, if not all of them, that have a bearing on decision-making and outcome. It is important, therefore, for all the critical information to be shared.

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In today's environment, hoarding knowledge ultimately erodes your power. If you know something very important, the way to get power is by actually sharing it.

– Joseph Badaracco

Reducing Workplace Bias: Confirmation Bias

However, there is the shared information bias which describes a tendency for decision-makers to spend more time and more intense focus on discussing shared information which everyone in the group is aware of, than unshared information which only some people are aware of.

This can have a critical impact on the quality of the decision and the efficacy of any subsequent policies. There are various reasons why there maybe an imbalance between the sharing of common and uncommon knowledge.

People might be very protective of what they know and be reluctant to share for a number of reasons including confidentiality, power, protection of feelings, group dynamics, concerns about political correctness, appropriateness and so on.



We owe almost all our knowledge not to those who have agreed, but to those who have differed.

– Charles Caleb Colton

It might also be that discussing shared information is easier and may seem more productive. Shared information is also a common denominator within the group and there might be a natural tendency to focus on it for group cohesion.

Now the shared information bias might have minimal effect if the unshared information is not pertinent or very significant. However, one often doesn't know the significance of a piece of information until it is shared.

Additionally, it can have a major impact if some members of the group simply are unaware of important information.

It is also possible that the inability or reluctance to share information becomes known at a later date, and rightly or wrongly, influences the narrative about how effective both the decision and the decision-making process were.

If some members of the group feel that they should have been privy to critical information that was withheld, that will undoubtedly impact subsequent group dynamics.



The more extensive a man's knowledge of what has been done, the greater will be his power of knowing what to do.

– Benjamin Disraeli

Reducing Workplace Bias: Confirmation Bias

Do you make the effort to find out whether group members are appropriately informed?

Do you take measures to ensure that all group members are appropriately informed?

How do you know that you are appropriately informed?

How can you ensure that you are?

Reducing Workplace Bias: Confirmation Bias

MEDITATION

You may think that a certain piece of information is not necessary for others involved in the decision-making process, but then you are making assumptions based on your own perspective. How do you know how others will see and interpret the information?

Perhaps your predictions about how others will use information is wrong. Perhaps sharing the information will lead to insights and perspectives that you hadn't even considered. We owe almost all our knowledge not to those who have agreed, but to those who have differed. An effective leader will not fear the perspectives of others.

An effective leader will not fear the perspectives of his team.
An effective leader will welcome the different perspectives of his team.

Sharing knowledge can seem like a burden to some but on the contrary, it is a reflection of teamwork and leadership. Sharing knowledge can seem like a burden to some but on the contrary, it is a reflection of teamwork and leadership. Keeping knowledge and information that may be important to effective decision-making to oneself, is not leadership.

In today's environment, hoarding knowledge ultimately erodes your power. If you know something very important, the way to get power is by actually sharing it. The way to get and maintain effective leadership is by sharing important information, not hiding it.

Effective leadership is about sharing. Effective leadership is about openness. Effective leadership is about trust.

If you don't trust a member of your team, perhaps it's time to consider whether they should be on your team. Encourage your team to share. Sharing is what makes you a team. The more extensive a man's knowledge of what has been done, the greater will be his power of knowing what to do.

Empower your team by giving them the opportunity to see information differently.
Empower yourself by giving your team the opportunity to see information differently.

Great leaders don't let their fears get in the way of decision-making. Fearful leaders aren't great at decision-making.

A culture of sharing is a culture of respect. A culture of sharing is a culture of honesty. A culture of sharing is a culture of authenticity.

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