

Webinar on decision-making

9.12.21  
Follow-up exercises

# Better decision-making (and how diversity can help): Some follow-up exercises

An hour-long webinar can only really scratch the surface of a subject like this. It will have a more valuable impact on your decision-making if you follow up with personal reflection, group discussions and workshops. These should be a chance for you and your colleagues to discuss specific examples of how cognitive biases affect you both as individuals and as an organisation. Together you can hopefully devise practical ways to put what you’ve learned into effect, for everyone’s benefit.

Here are some suggested exercises to use in those workshops, along with some notes – should you need them – to help shape the discussions. Some of the exercises can be done as individuals, but it’s still good to reflect on them with at least one other person afterwards.

Please do provide feedback if you use them, and let me know if you have other ideas you’re willing to share.

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## Warm-up exercise: Exploring your affinity biases

Think of a best friend, neighbour or colleague, someone you spend time with and enjoy talking to. Then think about how similar they are to you. For example:

* Are they pretty much the same age as you (or at least the same generation)?
* Are they the same gender?
* Do they have the same marital or partnership status as you?
* Do you share a cultural and/or ethnic background?
* Do you have the same or similar interests?
* Do you do a similar job (eg both professionals)?
* Are they from a similar social background to yours?
* Did they have a similar education?

Probably you’ll have answered “yes” to most of these questions. If not, congratulations on being more broad-minded than the average human being!

When it comes to selecting the people we hang around with, work with, listen to and share with, we tend to pick the ones who are *most like us*. People we “have a lot in common with”. Take a moment to reflect on how that might affect your relationships at work: not just who you go out to lunch or for a drink with, but who you feel comfortable working with; who you like to discuss things with; whose advice you seek; who you’d choose to help you on a project or join your working group.

## Workshop exercise 1: Recognising cognitive bias

Reflect on these questions on your own to begin with, then discuss with other people:

* Which of the cognitive biases in the 9 December 2021 webinar do you recognise, either in yourself or in others?
* When you experienced them in action, what happened? How did they affect the decisions made? What impact did they have on the people involved? How did they affect the organisation as a whole?
* What could have been done better?

## Workshop exercise 2: Testing for “implicit bias”

Take one or two of the Harvard University “implicit association” tests:

<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

These short online tests are a good way to find out more about your own unconscious biases, or to make your colleagues aware of theirs. There are versions covering various types of potential bias, for example by gender, skin tone, religion, sexuality, disability, age, etc…., so you pick what you’re interested in. You have to do the tests quickly, so that what's being measured is the subconscious heuristic rather than the rational thought process.

You might be surprised by the results. But if you are, you can then take steps to avoid your next decision being partially based on something you didn’t know.

It’s important to remember, of course, that the “implicit” biases and associations that these tests reveal don’t mean that you’re a bad person. They’re just patterns your brain has learned in the past, that you need to be aware of in the future.

The Harvard tests illustrate how "heuristics" (the brain’s mental shortcuts) can lead to things that look for all the world like prejudice, but are actually just cognitive biases. They measure how readily (in other words, how quickly) our brains make associations between certain groups of people and either specific attributes (good, bad, etc...) or specific roles (leader, scientist, doctor, teacher, childminder, secretary, lawyer...)

What's revealed by a Harvard test is a default pattern in your brain – what it will do if it's pushed for time or stressed. You can override that default if you take the time and trouble to be more objective, if you're aware of the risk points and adopt good decision-making habits. But it definitely means that "snap", "instinctive", "gut feel"-type reactions are more likely to be biassed.

[A personal note: I did some of the Harvard tests a few years back, including for women in STEM. I've nothing against women in STEM; I am one. But the Harvard test revealed that my brain is slower to associate women in STEM with positive things. The world I grew up in – sadly, the world I'm in now – has far fewer positive role models of women in STEM. My brain's heuristics have developed to recognise the male STEM professional more readily than the female, because he's the one I see most of. It's not that I think more highly of him. But my subconscious brain feels more comfortable with him.]

## Workshop exercise 3: Identifying cognitive biases

What cognitive biases can you identify in this interviewer’s thought processes? I’ve provided some suggested answers in the annex.

| Interviewer: | Cognitive bias(es)? |
| --- | --- |
| This candidate seems awfully timid. I can’t imagine they’d be good with clients. |  |
| I didn’t really warm to them. |  |
| BUT I’m not biased; I always recruit on merit and I’m very good at bringing out the best in people at interview. |  |
| Their CV doesn’t say anything about their skill with clients so I’ll ask them if they find client meetings difficult. |  |
| They do have excellent references. But maybe the referees were biased. |  |
| I still can’t get over how timid they are; that could be a real problem. They got more nervous the more I questioned them. |  |
| I don’t think they’d fit in very well with the team here. We’re all such extroverts. |  |
| My team-mates thought the same. |  |

## Workshop exercise 4: Tackling “anchoring”

Here are some examples of “anchoring” at work. Discuss how you might identify the anchoring if it had happened to you, in what way it might be problematic and what steps you could take (a) to reach a more objective outcome despite the anchoring and (b) to reduce the risk of it occurring in similar situations.

Also consider if there are any other cognitive biases involved in these scenarios.

1. You arrive for a job interview. The office is swish but unwelcoming. The people who greet you seem impatient. Everyone else who passes by ignores you. As you hand over your shabby coat you get the impression you’re being looked down on. The rest of the interview goes well but you can’t get over that initial unfriendly reception. They make you an offer but you can’t bring yourself to accept it.
2. Your client’s competitors offer to sell their patent for £2M. They say this is what another potential buyer has offered but you and your client think it’s way too high. Eventually you negotiate them down to £1.5M. You’re really pleased with this; it seems like excellent value. And yet the £2M probably *was* totally unreasonable, and quite possibly an arbitrary starting point, so was it really such a good deal?
3. You meet a solicitor at a local networking event and get on very well with them. You share a few drinks. The following week you play squash together. You think they’re a good egg, so you instruct them to do the conveyancing for your subsequent house move. They’re a bit slow to answer your emails, especially the ones with difficult questions in, and on one occasion they misunderstand your instructions and nearly cause your sale to fall through. But you stick with them, giving them the benefit of the doubt every time something goes wrong.

## Workshop exercise 5: Assumptions and stereotypes in your world

What are the biases, assumptions and stereotypes that affect your work?

First, reflect on the assumptions that the people you work with make about:

* The type of person you are
* What you’ll be good at
* The way you work
* The support you need
* What you’re interested in
* Who you’ll want to work with
* Your role in, and value to, the team
* Your career ambitions
* Your educational background
* Your home life

Having done that, reflect on the assumptions that *you* make about other people.

(It may be easier to do this exercise by focusing on one specific individual at work – not someone you work closely with every day but perhaps a line manager or a colleague in another department.)

## Workshop exercise 6: Pattern and stereotype recognition

What does your mental definition of “professional” look like?

* Picture a hypothetical professional. What do they look like? How are they dressed? How do they speak? How do they behave? How clever are they? What do you expect of them?
* How do you distinguish between someone who’s “professional” and someone who’s “unprofessional”?
* To what extent is “professional” a quality of a person rather than an aspect of their behaviour?
* How do these things affect the way you evaluate people for instance at interviews, pitches and networking events?
* How do they affect your views of the people you work with? Are there some you think are more or less professional than others?

## Workshop exercise 7: Evaluating information and evidence

This is an exercise for people who have to analyse information and evidence in order to, for example, prepare a case before a tribunal, or advise about a legal issue such as infringement or validity.

Remind yourself of the key types of cognitive bias that can affect our choice of sources:

* Authority bias: the tendency to give greater weight to information and opinions from people we *believe* to have authority.
* Common source bias: a preference for combining or comparing evidence from the same source, or from sources that use the same methodologies or input data.
* Availability heuristic: the tendency to give more weight to, and make unjustified assumptions about, information that’s more readily available in our memory.
* Survivorship bias: a focus on success stories, rather than failures that we could otherwise learn from.

Focusing on a current or recent case of yours, reflect on:

1. The points at which these biases might have come into play.
2. The effects they might have had on your arguments or advice.
3. Other biases that might have exacerbated those effects.
4. The risks they exposed you to (for example, vulnerability to an opponent’s attack, or to a professional error).
5. What you’ll do next time to reduce those risks.
   * (Try creating a checklist of things you’ll ask yourself before finalising a decision, submission or piece of advice.)

## Workshop exercise 8: Cognitive biases in your organisation

Reflect on:

* Where in your organisation are cognitive biases likely to arise?
* What problems might they cause for the organisation as a whole? And for the people in it?
* *What systemic measures can you put in place to reduce those problems?*

## Workshop exercise 9: Recruiting, assessing and promoting “on merit”

Pretty much all of us involved in recruitment and assessment will swear blind that we base our decisions purely “on merit”. But the value of doing that depends very much on how we define “merit”, and the extent to which that’s coloured by what we already know.

### Exercise 9a

Firstly, discuss the following questions about your personal idea of professional “merit”, and the patterns your brain has come to associate with that term.

1. How do you define professional “merit”? What criteria are you looking for when you evaluate someone in the workplace?
2. Which of those criteria are “core” skills that are vital to a person’s role, and which are “non-core” skills to do with their general behaviour at work?
3. To what extent do you think your definition is:
   * Based on what you’ve seen in the past?
   * Based on what you see around you now?
   * Based on in-groups and out-groups and affinity bias?
4. Does your definition incorporate stereotypes (for example, do you expect women to be likeable and men to be confident)?
5. Could there be an element of confirmation bias involved? Do you ever find yourself looking for traits that reinforce, and therefore perpetuate, your existing mental definition of merit?
6. Might other cognitive biases (including bias “blind spots”) be coming into play, to make you less objective than you first thought?

### Exercise 9b

Next, take a look at these three comments about experimental evidence relevant to equality in assessment and recruitment systems. Discuss with colleagues the type of biases that might be coming into play, and what steps could be taken to minimise their negative impact.

1. There are studies showing that people responsible for appraising, hiring and promoting can – presumably unconsciously – give greater weight to the strengths and achievements of white men, whilst focusing on the weaknesses and failures of, say, women and people from ethnic minorities.
2. There’s experimental evidence that given identical CVs but with different names on, many people will look less favourably on the ones attributed to women, and/or to people they assume belong to a minority ethnic group. Interestingly, female assessors show the same response, ie they tend to evaluate the male CVs more favourably.
3. In 2015 the Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission conducted a study into how elite law and accountancy firms recruited new talent. In addition to intelligence and competence, the recruiters’ definition of “talent” incorporated a number of “non-core” factors such as drive, resilience, strong communication skills, confidence and something they referred to as “polish”. Many of those qualities come from, or can be significantly improved by, a more privileged social and educational background

### Exercise 9c

Finally, as a longer-term exercise for those in decision-making positions, try to find out what the *evidence* says about your organisation’s definition of merit:

* Gather diversity data from the applications you receive, and from candidates short-listed, interviewed and selected.
  + What, if any, patterns emerge?
  + How “level” does the playing field look?
  + How does it differ between departments or teams?
* Monitor how the selected candidates progress through the organisation: data from each appraisal and promotion opportunity; the make-up of each leadership and management tier
* If yours is a small organisation, where this type of data gathering might be unfeasible, discuss how you might overcome that problem in order to hold yourselves to account

## Workshop exercise 10: Recruiting, assessing and promoting for a “good fit”

Particularly in smaller organisations or departments, you’ll want to ensure that the next person who comes on board can work with the people already there without either side getting upset.

But if a “good fit” in the existing team is one of your recruitment criteria, one of your measures of “merit”, then it’s always worth asking yourself whether that really is appropriate, or whether it might actually hinder your development. Recruiting more of the same is exactly what leads to groupthink, false consensus and similar cognitive biases.

Reflect on or discuss these issues around “good fit” and your mental definition of “merit”.

Firstly:

* The extent to which your definition of “merit” includes being a “good fit” in the existing organisation, department or team.
* What “a good fit” looks like to you.
  + Is it about working style? Skills? Behaviour? Values? Personality type?
* Which if any of your “good fit” criteria are not actually essential.
* Which of them are your “red line” values (ethical ones, perhaps) that genuinely have to be present.

Next, think about your current team or department (or the whole organisation if sufficiently small):

* In what ways are you all similar?
* In what ways are you different?
* Are there any personality types, thinking styles or approaches missing?
  + For example, are you all introverts with no extroverts? Are you all detail people and missing someone who can see the big picture? Are you all trying to be “leaders”? Are you all confident or all shy?

Finally:

* Is it in your interests to seek out more of the same?
* How could you recruit, assess and promote to allow a little more diversity?
* If you did, how would you ensure that the newcomers felt welcome and were able to contribute positively?

I recently came across a useful metaphor for this. It was along the lines of: the goalkeeper’s key to the team, but you wouldn’t want a team full of goalkeepers. A strong team has a range of components – people with different skills playing different, and complementary, roles. Similarly for a professional team, you don’t want everyone to be a leader or everyone to be a worker. You don’t want everyone to be bold and ambitious but equally, you don’t want everyone to be cautious. There is strength in diversity, even if at the start it ruffles a few feathers.

And there is evidence to support this, as referenced at the end of the 9 December 2021 webinar. More diverse teams have been shown to be more innovative and creative, better at problem solving, and more profitable. The global management consulting outfit McKinsey & Company, in their regular surveys since about 2015, have noticed a correlation between diversity on executive teams and the likelihood of high performance – a correlation that’s strengthening with time. Other researchers have observed similar effects.

In 2006, a US study used either all-white or racially-mixed juries in simulated case discussions and observed the impact on their deliberations. The more diverse panels not only reached different decisions (being less likely to presume a Black defendant’s guilt); they were also more thorough in their evaluation of the evidence: they deliberated for longer, considered a broader range of facts, and made fewer factual errors.

And let’s not forget that more diverse teams are also increasingly being required by clients in their invitations to tender for work.

So it is sometimes sensible to recruit *for difference*. Deliberately. We can identify what we already have and what we still need – in terms, for example, of working styles – and recruit for the missing bits. We don’t *have* to be afraid of someone challenging the status quo: their contribution could be valuable for overcoming biases and helping us make better decisions.

## Workshop exercise 11: Fostering a good decision-making environment

Look at the six general suggestions below, for creating a better decision-making environment. Then think about how – at the day-to-day practical level – you can make those things happen in your organisation. I’ve provided some notes in the annex, for you to use as a crib-sheet if you get stuck.

1. Increase diversity in your working groups and teams – including diversity of perspectives, approaches and working styles.
2. Allow everyone, and every opinion, to be heard; establish an inclusive culture in which people are *encouraged* to speak up and if appropriate to challenge the status quo.
3. Call out unconstructive behaviour – including your own.
4. Be creative about approaches to tasks and decisions.
5. Stay vigilant. Talk openly about cognitive bias. Keep it on the agenda so everyone knows to look out for it.
6. Surround yourself with a more diverse collection of perspectives and role models.

## Workshop exercise 12: Personal development

Finish up by reflecting on a few things for you personally:

* Based on what you’ve learnt about cognitive biases, how are you going to change the way you make decisions:
  + About other people?
  + About your work?
  + (If applicable) about business strategy?
* What are you going to do to help foster a better decision-making environment in your own team, department or organisation?

# Annex

## Workshop exercise 3: Identifying cognitive biases

Some suggested answers:

| Interviewer: | Cognitive bias(es)? |
| --- | --- |
| This candidate seems awfully timid. I can’t imagine they’d be good with clients. | Assumptions; first impressions; fundamental attribution error |
| I didn’t really warm to them. | Affinity bias |
| BUT I’m not biased; I always recruit on merit and I’m very good at bringing out the best in people at interview. | Bias blind spot; Dunning Kruger |
| Their CV doesn’t say anything about their skill with clients so I’ll ask them if they find client meetings difficult. | Confirmation bias |
| They do have excellent references. But maybe the referees were biased. | Confirmation bias |
| I still can’t get over how timid they are; that could be a real problem. They got more nervous the more I questioned them. | Anchoring  Unconscious privilege |
| I don’t think they’d fit in very well with the team here. We’re all such extroverts. | Status quo bias; affinity bias |
| My team-mates thought the same. | Groupthink? |

## Workshop exercise 11: Notes about fostering a good decision-making environment

#### Mix things up a bit

Mix things up a bit in working groups and teams. Avoid reinforcing existing in-groups and out-groups, especially when seeking input on a decision. Seek out new people to ask. Give colleagues a chance to try new things.

Aim for “cognitive diversity” in the groups you form. Include people with different approaches, perspectives and working styles. Deliberately recruit for difference rather than always aiming for a “good fit”.

#### Let every voice be heard

Diversity won’t help if some people in the group don’t feel able to contribute. Sometimes a bit of training, or even a guided workshop or two, may get them used to making confident, but also constructive, contributions. It doesn’t come naturally to everyone. You can help by providing examples, useful vocabulary for certain scenarios, and plenty of practice. Role-play can help both sides (challenger and challenged) feel more comfortable and equip them with the language and social protocols to handle challenges.

In this context it’s vital that leaders and managers provide good role models – by asking questions and gently challenging beliefs and decisions. They too may need training and practice to do that constructively.

In meetings, make sure every view is properly listened to and considered. Make time to ask the timid ones, or the ones who look angry or puzzled or generally disengaged but haven’t yet spoken. The more different perspectives that are brought to bear on a decision, and the better able those people are to speak up, the more likely you are to spot the problematic biases and interrupt them before they cause a mistake.

#### Call out unconstructive behaviour

Be brave about calling out unconstructive behaviour, such as speaking over someone, interrupting them, ignoring them, claiming ownership of their ideas, or personal comments. All these things can discourage people from contributing important new perspectives. And with regard to the personal comments, what’s important in these scenarios is to challenge an opinion, not the person who’s expressing it: there’s a difference.

The onus is on the chair of a meeting to create a safe, orderly space where everyone feels able to speak. But others can help. And advance agendas can be used to clarify who’s supposed to address which topics, so that the less confident speakers know when it’s their turn and there can be no doubt that the meeting should pay attention to them on at least “their” issues. It’s worth remembering that a person’s cultural background can influence whether they feel able to speak up unless specifically invited.

It also helps to call out stereotypes, generalisations, assumptions and other sloppy, ill-based thought processes (including your own) when you come across them. Gently probe for evidence, specific examples and sources. Sometimes just noticing and questioning these thought processes can be enough to “interrupt” a bias.

Again, you may need to train people to do this constructively, just as you can provide training about running inclusive meetings and about preventing unhelpful behaviours. And again, it’s important that leaders and managers set a good example: it’s easier to call something out when you’re one of the more senior people in the group, especially the chair.

#### Be creative about working patterns

Be a bit more creative about working patterns generally and also about approaches to specific decisions and tasks. You don’t necessarily have to follow the methodology that was first suggested, or that you used last time. The more open-minded you are, the more receptive to the unfamiliar, the less likely you are to make inappropriately biased decisions. And the Covid-19 lockdown has opened our minds to new ways of collaborating, so build on that if you can.

#### Provide training

Providing training is a useful way of improving everyone’s decision-making. Whether it’s training of the type discussed above, to help people participate more effectively in discussions, or specifically in recognising and avoiding cognitive biases, it all helps. Even if it’s just the basics.

Probably it’s most important that the people in charge have this training, not only because they’re likely to make the big strategic decisions but also because their approach sets the tone for everyone else’s. It’s also obviously important that anyone involved in recruiting, appraising or managing other people has at least a basic introduction to how cognitive biases might impact on their work.

But ideally, everyone – in every role and at every level – should get at least the basic training, because everyone’s behaviour has an impact on someone else in the workplace. That avoids singling anyone out as potentially “more biased” than others, and it provides a foundation for more advanced training as they progress through the organisation.

Make sure that everyone understands the purpose and value of this training. No snide comments from managers about it being a bit of a waste of time or a box-ticking exercise. You can’t inoculate yourself against unconscious bias with a single quick training course. The training is only the beginning. It raises awareness and understanding. But it has to be followed up on with concrete changes to systems, procedures and working practices.

(See this article from the Equality and Human Rights Commission, “Unconscious bias training: an assessment of the evidence for effectiveness”, which gives guidance about getting the best out of unconscious bias training: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/unconscious-bias-training-assessment-evidence-effectiveness>. There’s been debate in recent years about whether unconscious bias training works, but the bottom line is it’s all in the follow-up. If you walk away afterwards expecting it to have transformed your life, the “training” probably won’t work. But put it to considered and practical use afterwards and it surely will bring benefits.)

#### Value unbiased decision-making

Treat it as an important professional skill to understand and address the implications of cognitive bias. When you evaluate someone’s performance, take into account their ability to make measured, fair decisions.

#### Stay vigilant

Keep cognitive bias on the agenda. Talk openly about its presence and its effects. The more you’re aware of it, the more you understand it, the easier it is to take action against it. Group follow-up, like in these exercises, can help you get the most out of any training you do.

Take some of the Harvard “implicit association” tests mentioned above: they’re a good way to raise awareness of “biases” without being too judgemental. And if everyone does them, the issues they raise become more meaningful.

#### Surround yourself with diversity

Finally, it genuinely helps us to be better decision-makers if we’re surrounded by diversity, by people and things that open our minds, keep us questioning and learning, challenge our existing ideas and behaviours.

So, mix more with your “out-groups” and broaden your “in-groups” to more, and more different types of, people. Build a more diverse network of colleagues and friends. Try to read, watch and listen to new things. Surround yourself with images of a wider range of people. Celebrate awareness dates such as LGBT+ History Month (February), Black History Month (October) and International Day of Persons with Disabilities (3 December) and use them as an opportunity to ask questions and broaden your view of the world. Try to be a good “ally” to people in under-represented groups; you can learn a lot from them too.

Do what you can to promote positive and stereotype-challenging role models, both within your organisation and beyond. As a start, check what images you’re using, and assumptions you’re making, in your corporate literature. Those role models will form the basis of the shortcut assumptions made by people associated with the organisation. They’re a powerful form of “priming” – and you don’t want to prime for bias. Instead, prime for the world you’re aiming for, even if it doesn’t accurately reflect your current situation, because it helps “normalise” that world, creating an expectation and encouraging more people to feel that there’s a place for them.

The point of all this is to help your brain develop a wider base from which to extrapolate patterns and assumptions, so that on the occasions when you have to rely on mental shortcuts for rapid decisions, the foundations are laid for a more balanced response. Shape your environment to be more like the world you want to see, and that is what your brain will, subconsciously, begin to use as the default. And it will be a default that takes account of a wider range of viewpoints – invaluable for countering those cognitive biases.

A more diverse network will also give you a wider, and hopefully more representative, pool of people with whom to consult when you need to. Each person has different learned patterns, different anchors, different cognitive biases – so statistically, the more of them that contribute to a decision, the greater the likelihood that they'll identify and counteract one another's biases.