

"It is the peculiar and perpetual error of the human understanding to be more moved and excited by affirmatives than by negatives." --Francis Bacon

People are frequently encountering situations where two or more competing interests create an increased risk of bias or poor judgment. Challenging situations arise often in both our personal and professional lives where something must be acted on, decided or evaluated. Doing so with integrity requires an understanding that everyone is influenced by such variables as genetic predisposition, parental predilection, sibling influence, peer pressure, educational experience and life impressions, all of which create bias and can ultimately influence choices. This essay discusses bias in the workplace, particularly as pertains to the information technology environment in which the paper's author currently works, and presents information on the necessity to recognize and minimize bias in order to avoid discriminatory practices.

Bias refers to the tendency, often unconsciously, for people either to be critical of information which contradicts their prior beliefs and to accept that which supports those assumptions, or to simply avoid new information which is counter to their preconceptions. (Lord, Ross and Lepper, 1979.) It is much easier to give an excessive amount of value to confirmatory information, that is, to positive or supportive data, than to information which is counter to preconceived ideas. The "most likely reason for the excessive influence of confirmatory information is that it is easier to deal with cognitively" (Gilovich 1993). The tendency to give more attention and weight to the positive and the confirmatory has been shown to influence memory. When digging into our memories for data relevant to a position, we are more likely to recall data that confirms the position (ibid.).

Individuals have to constantly remind themselves of this tendency and actively seek out opinions contrary to their beliefs. However, rarely do any of us sit down before a table of facts, weigh them pro and con, and choose the most logical and rational explanation, regardless of what we

previously believed. Most of us, most of the time, come to our beliefs for a variety of reasons having little to do with empirical evidence and logical reasoning. We then sort through the various bits of information and select those that most confirm what we already believe, and ignore or rationalize away those that do not (Shermer, 2002).

Although business managers have a professional, fiduciary, and ethical interest in the responsible conduct of hiring, managing and evaluating employees, these interests may be compromised by bias. Interests that might conflict with the integrity of one's position include career advancement, fame, power, or family and friendships (RCR, 2004.) For example, the author of this essay, being a manager who has learned various methods for implementing software development projects, may tend, during the hiring interview, to view unfavorably a candidate who is highly qualified, but who espouses a development approach unfamiliar to the author. Similarly, bias could alter choices about data selection, statistical methods, and presentation of results in the information technology (IT) environment.

Unintentional bias can be an even more serious threat than deliberate misconduct, because those who consider themselves without bias would be unaware of the ways in which their actions were affected. In the December 2003 issue of Harvard Business Review, professor of social ethics at Harvard University Mahzarin R. Banaji and co-authors Max H. Bazerman and Dolly Chugh write that, "most managers are burdened with unconscious biases that often result in unintentionally unethical decisions (Banaji, 2003)." Banaji argues that there are constraints on ethics that are not visible to the conscious mind, and even if they are, may not be easily controlled. "All behavior", wrote Banaji, "including behavior that has ethical implications, can be guided by thoughts and feelings that reside in unconscious form. Managers are no different, except that their attitudes and behavior have greater impact on others because of their role."

Citing an example in an IT setting, Banaji indicated that an implicit bias that may flourish concerns gender, in that men are being selected for such positions more often than women, being given positions of higher responsibility and retained with greater confidence. Since IT is such a collaborative occupation, bias can cause certain team members to feel disaffection and a sense of being unrecognized, leading to a breakdown in efficiency and an increase in errors.

Of course, having a personal bias does not necessarily mean acting irresponsibly. How can an IT manager deal with these ethical lapses if he's not even conscious of them? "Act affirmatively", argues Banaji (to combat discrimination), "not because the group or person has been wronged in the past, but because the harm from implicit bias is a thing of the present." Banaji contends that "vigilance even more than intention is a defining characteristic of the ethical manager. Good intentions don't always protect us (, but) vigilance is an effective way to begin the process of change."

In addition, there are a variety of regulations and guidelines that govern ethical behavior in the workplace. The most relevant of these are federal regulations, notably those of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which addresses matters of discrimination, harassment and retaliation, and provides guidelines for employment practices in such areas as:

- hiring and firing;
- compensation, assignment, or classification of employees;
- transfer, promotion, layoff, or recall;
- job advertisements;
- recruitment;
- testing;
- use of company facilities;

- training and apprenticeship programs;
- fringe benefits;
- pay, retirement plans, and disability leave

Federal regulations defer, in part, to institutional policies. Those that govern employment practices at this author's current client work site are contained in a handbook (ZFNB, 2006), the reading of which must be affirmed by each employee. Included is a chapter referring to hiring practices, which states:

“It is the policy of the Company to provide equal employment opportunity to all qualified applicants and employees regardless of race, color, religion, sex, age (40 years or older), national origin, veteran status, disability, or any other basis protected by law. We recruit and hire employees based on individual ability and experience, in compliance with equal opportunity and affirmative action laws and regulations. We promote and encourage a diverse workforce. In keeping with the growing diversity in our marketplace, we are committed to recruiting and retaining high-caliber employees who reflect the diversity of the markets we serve. All employees are expected to perform all job duties and interact with other employees and customers without regard to race, color, religion, sex, age (40 years or older), national origin, veteran status, disability, or any other basis protected by law. If you believe you have not received treatment consistent with this policy, discuss the matter with a supervisor or contact a Human Resources officer. The Company prohibits retaliation against any person who reports such inappropriate behavior resulting solely from the fact of the report. Any employee found to have violated the policy of Equal Employment Opportunity shall be subject to appropriate disciplinary action, up to and including termination.”

It is important to understand that good intentions are not enough. Even when acting in complete accordance with company policies and government regulations, perceived bias can result in consequences as damaging as if intentional misconduct had been committed. With increased media, governmental, and public scrutiny, a company's reputation, contracts and ability to hire the most qualified employees can depend as much on perceptions of integrity as on integrity itself. It is therefore extremely important that acting forthrightly requires a conscious recognition of one's own tendency toward favoritism, then acting in accordance with sound judgment, rather than with preconceptions alone.

References

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