

Management and Performance Associates – July - August, 2017

Shifting Criteria – How our biases impact the way we judge people



After rushing to the airport, I get a notification as I walk into the terminal that my flight is delayed. With time on my hands I decide to sit at the bar and order a drink. To my surprise, the waitress asks me for my ID. Saying that I am completely flattered by the request I show her the document. Without batting an eyelash she replies: “Honey, don’t be flattered, this is our policy. We ID everyone. Not just the young ones.”

After swallowing my pride, I reflected on her words and considered the fairness of the policy. Coincidentally, I was just coming from a training program that includes the concept of *shifting criteria*. If you are unfamiliar with the concept, it deals with using different criteria for judging different people, because of our biases. In this training session, we show a video in which an African American woman is required to show ID after paying with a check at a supermarket. That “requirement” was not used for the previous customer; a white woman.

As the famous French existentialist intellectual Simone de Beauvoir stated “It is doubtless impossible to approach any human problems with a mind free from bias.” The following are some recommendations to reduce the effects of biases in decision making.

Gain awareness of your biases

Move away from denial, we are all biased. How many times do we fall into these traps? We have three recommendations here:

- 1) Audit your decisions. Would they be different if the person involved belonged to a different group? Did I use different criteria just because the other person was different?
- 2) Get feedback. Ask a trusted peer about his/her opinion. A friend. A family member. Then, listen.
- 3) Take a Project Implicit Test. We all associate different characteristics as good or bad. Your test can cover topics such as disabilities, gender, race, age, sexual orientation and even political opinions (JFK vs. Trump). Visit the following website:

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

Focus on the facts

As we say in our interviewing classes, hire different people ‘because’ of their differences, not in spite of their differences. Every Captain Kirk can appreciate the different perspectives brought up by Spock (sorry for the reference if you are not a Star Trek fan).

Interviewing situations are typical scenarios where shifting criteria are present. We may not be as thorough with the candidate that belongs to the same group as we do. That interview sounds like a nice conversation, meanwhile the one with the “diverse” candidate sounds like an interrogation. Have a plan for the interview; ask the same questions of all the candidates, focusing on competencies that are required for the job. Focus on the facts, not your preferences.

Be aware of inferences

The Ladder of Inference was first put forward by organizational psychologist Chris Argyris and used by Peter Senge in *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. At the base of

the ladder we have the facts. However, from there different people will take different steps and come to different conclusions because they then select a part of the reality that fits their mindset. They will interpret what that means, and make assumptions which leads to their “right” action. Many times they won’t even look at the facts; they simply use them to support beliefs they already have.

A few months ago we were staying at a five star downtown hotel in Detroit. I was at the back of the elevator going to my room, next to me a white woman. The elevator stopped on the second floor (convention center) and a large group of African American men walked in. As I walked out of the elevator when I reached my floor, the white woman quickly followed me out even though it wasn’t her floor. She said “I don’t feel safe at this hotel.” In her mind, that group of men was equal to trouble. She “ignored” the reality that 80% of the population of Detroit is of African descent and she did not see their badges showing they were attending a religious conference.

What can be done? We suggest walking toward your discomfort, expanding your circles, building relationships with people that are different from you in terms of race, gender, age, sexual orientation, etc, and getting to know them.

Be brave and address non inclusive behaviors

Those can be very uncomfortable situations, especially when the offensive party is someone higher in the food chain. Juniors are constantly learning what is acceptable or not in an office culture by observing their managers, the same way children learn from their parents and relatives.

So, what could you do differently the next time you see uncle Bob making derogatory comments about gays, blacks and/or Jews as the family is eating Thanksgiving dinner?

If you want to know more about the topic and have some 18 minutes to spare, we recommend you watch the following TED Talk by Vernā Myers, a diversity advocate. Her presentation is in English,

but you can get the transcript in additional 25 languages.

https://www.ted.com/talks/verna_myers_how_to_overcome_our_biases_walk_boldly_toward_them#t-84815

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See you next time. As always, we welcome your feedback.