

Reducing Conflict 43 You Are Never Objective

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



I originally intended to have the title for this article read “How Do You Know When You Are Biased.” I realized that it is impossible to be totally unbiased on an issue. The most we can do is be conscious of our biases and factor that knowledge into our deliberations. We can also seek to replace hubris with humility.

Nobody is Totally Objective

To be totally objective would put us in the category of a machine or computer. Unless you are Mr. Spock, you have emotions and cannot entirely separate your logical reasoning from your emotions. You also carry a set of beliefs that come from all the experiences you have had to date. You cannot detach yourself from your unique mindset any more than the earth can detach from the solar system. With herculean effort, you may be able to change your orbit a perceptible amount. You will always be subject to the laws of physics in your corner of the universe.

Measuring Performance

One place to observe bias is when managers try to measure the performance of people who work for them. Imagine a manager trying to write an objective performance appraisal. Because the manager is a human being, he or she will observe performance through a certain lens. It would be impossible to factor out personal biases. By recognizing that there is the certainty of a bias, the manager can take that into account. One tool is to use a correlation process where several managers review the appraisals each one has written.

If you have an environment of trust, groups of managers can discuss observations about an individual without getting defensive. In this open discussion, one particular manager’s biases can become more visible. This practice reduces the problem of favoritism and enhances the level of trust in an organization.

Biased Media

Another area where we struggle to be objective is when thinking about political issues. We are bombarded by information presented with strong biases already baked in. Most of us prefer to listen to the “news” that is slanted in the direction we habitually lean. That gives us a kind of affirmation that our biases are valid. For fun, I listen to news on a network known for having the opposite bias from my own. It is a kind of jarring exercise

as I quickly see how their biases are strikingly “wrong.” Then I realize that it could be my biases that are so far off base. One thing is for sure, when interpreting political forces, there is no such thing as objectivity.

Your opinion is a very personal thing; the good news is that you can never get your opinion wrong. The bad news is that your opinion will never be totally objective. Factor that conundrum into your decisions and relationships with other people. One tool to do this is to take off the “I AM RIGHT” button you wear every day. Replace it with a button that says, “I have an opinion on that – what’s yours?”

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