

FREE FIRST CHAPTER

LAY OFF YOUR COGNITIVE BIASES

Work Smarter, Not Biased

How To Identify Them And Ways To Prevent Disastrous Mistakes And Missed Opportunities At Work — Chapter One. About a 27-minute read.

Most people have at least one experience in their life where they find themselves questioning what inspired a choice they made, especially when living the unwanted consequences of it.

They often find themselves feeling unintelligent, dumbfounded at their actions, and regretting not thinking their choice through more thoroughly. Unfortunately, many people have this experience often, wondering why they did what they did or said what they said.

The emergence of this pattern in people's lives can cause anxiety when faced with yet another choice. Will they make the right choice this time or wish they'd chosen a different course of action in one month, one year, or even ten years' time? This lack of assurance when it comes to making choices might cause a person to feel lost in feelings of inadequacy with no idea how they got there or how to get out. They aren't incompetent, though. They are simply caught in the web of cognitive biases resulting from the evolutionary process.

It is hard to think clearly and make sound choices in a world where it can feel like chaos is the norm at any hour of the day. The reality is that society has changed much faster than the human brain has evolved. As a result, many of the difficulties humans face when thinking about which decisions to make, evaluating information, and performing in their jobs stem from evolutionary survival instincts that may not apply to today's world. Despite these

biological challenges, people can gain control of their thoughts and find clarity in the midst of their busy schedules.

By examining how the brain creates mental shortcuts, known as cognitive biases, individuals gain an understanding of the motivations behind their decisions, thoughts, values, and actions. This understanding provides a sense of clarity that works in their favor, guiding them to make wise choices with a broad understanding of the potential consequences. In addition, this knowledge allows access to the motivations of others as one begins to recognize biases at play in the choices others make. Leaders can guide their teams and employees to greater success, eventually seeing that pay off for the business.

In addition, practice in implementing strategies that counter these potentially damaging biases results in personal, and consequently professional, growth. To counter many of the biases that impact a person at work, they must be open to multiple perspectives.

Considering viewpoints, values, and knowledge other than one's own can ensure no details are missed, better policies are created, and everyone feels valued. Interpersonal relationships are strengthened as people begin to feel more comfortable sharing feedback, further improving working relationships and offering accountability for personal growth. Empathy and compassion enter the workplace as one begins to understand the reasons and motivations behind the actions or values of another person, and open, constructive communication about these things becomes expected. Conversations are no longer arguments of willpower, continuing until one person gives up. Even if there is no agreement between colleagues on values, they can come to an agreement on the best compromise based on all stakeholder interests. With this kind of growth and openness in a workplace, the only possible result is success. These results can be challenging to achieve, however, as getting to them can be uncomfortable.

I remember sitting in one of my university classes, listening to a fellow student talk about how the novel we were reading distressed her. It was *No Crystal Stair* by Mairuth Sarsfield, and she didn't like reading about the issues of race that permeated the story. Our professor nodded thoughtfully, pursed his lips, and then spoke slowly and calmly. He told us that when things make us uncomfortable, we have to pay attention to them. We can't avoid

them, rather we have a responsibility to explore our discomfort. We have to ask ourselves why we are uncomfortable with what we read, hear, or see because it reveals our values, society's values, and aspects of those realms that need to change. This lesson has translated to all areas of my life over the years; I have used it to guide my self-reflection in relationships, meeting new people, at work, when weighing projects, and even the way I view myself. This lesson works well when dealing with cognitive biases because it forces people to pay attention to feelings they would rather avoid, and it holds people accountable for examining the root of those emotions.

I feel fortunate that my university degree focused on integrating multiple perspectives into the course content because it forced me to examine my own discomfort and my own values, and to adopt a mentality of exploring different viewpoints before jumping to conclusions. This mindset was further cultivated when I went to teacher's college—the best research on the Pygmalion effect (you can read more about this in chapter 12) having already made its way into pedagogical theory. Judgment had to stay outside the classroom, and each student needed to feel valued to create a safe learning environment. Going into my career working with the spongy minds of students, I felt confident, empathetic, and like I had everything (including myself) under control.

Ten years later, I wondered where those feelings had gone. I was confident in my ability to teach the content and see student achievement improve—standardized tests supported that confidence. But I felt stagnant and uncomfortable with that. I tried my best to change the texts I was teaching, write the best content and resources for my courses, refocus the content of my courses to apply to current issues, and challenge my students to think critically about themselves and the world they lived in. I shared my professor's advice with almost every class I taught.

In spite of all these things, I felt as though I was never really moving forward, never recognized by my superiors for my ability and the work I was doing, and had nowhere to apply my expertise. I felt as though some of the choices I had made in my career regarding where to focus my time and attention weren't working toward my own or my students' benefits. I was working so hard all the time and getting nowhere. I was even staring at the

same classroom walls day in and day out, sitting in the same gray desk I had been ten years before. I was also experiencing difficult relationships with my extended family, and seeing the consequences of choices I had made when I was younger—they were holding me in the mire I had created. I began to wonder if there was a pattern in my life I couldn't see. Eventually, I found myself googling psychologists in my end of the city.

This was the first step on a long journey of self-discovery and growth. I learned about the way the human brain works and how that impacts the way we see ourselves, how others see us, and the way we see the world. With knowledge came power and a sense of control over my decisions. I'm neither perfect nor have all the answers, but growth is a life-long process. I do have better relationships with my family, and I can take ownership of the choices I make, which are usually better than they were previously. My choices are intentional now, considering more information than just what I see. The world is constantly changing at the same time that it is full of constants. Understanding how to make sense of these things in light of human nature, biology, and psychology can help move people to greater success and confidence. It can offer assurance that the choices they make are working toward their success instead of holding them back.

This book doesn't offer a magic solution, and examining one's areas of discomfort is never easy. Often the strategies for combating cognitive biases offered in this book require hard work, changes, and dedication, but they aren't impossible. Having the information is always the first step—awareness inherently allows a person to begin observing how and in what areas of their life biases are working for better or worse. This book offers that information and gives solutions to people who feel stuck but know they are capable of more, those who want to see their business succeed, and those who want to watch the people they lead thrive. If you are one of those people, keep reading.

Work Smarter, Not Biased

Sarah sat at her desk staring at the numbers on the page in front of her. The marketing research document had been sent that morning, and she was expected to prepare a summary for tomorrow's marketing meeting. There was so much data from the research

that she felt she would never be able to accurately summarize it by the next morning. She felt pressured by the timeline she was given.

But this wasn't Sarah's first time doing this; she was experienced at her job and knew how to be efficient using her background knowledge. She knew that generally people responded better to emotional stimuli than to facts. She took a deep breath, sat back in her chair, and began to look for things that popped out at her from the page. She noticed that, indeed, the majority of those surveyed responded to emotional stimuli and were more likely to buy the product. A few of the numbers suggested that others did not respond to the emotional stimuli of an experience and instead responded to the facts connected to the product—exactly as usual.

Before wrapping up her day, Sarah typed up her results and prepared to share them at the meeting. She felt great on her commute home; she had been efficient in a tough situation, using her knowledge, skills, and expertise to complete her job on time and with little stress.

The next morning, Sarah presented her findings. "As you can see," she began, "The majority of respondents found the emotional appeal compelling. They liked seeing the experience connected to the products, and were able to visualize themselves living that same experience." She noticed people nodding their heads as she continued. "This pattern reflects what we have seen in other surveys, and it matches the patterns we have seen in market analysis during and after emotionally charged advertising campaigns." Although Sarah could see the general consensus, she knew she had to address the outliers. "A few of those surveyed responded more to the facts than the emotional appeals. The statistical benefits gave them accurate information they could integrate into their decisions to buy the product. These outliers always exist, so focusing advertising campaigns on these consumers doesn't make sense. Instead, it makes sense to continue focusing on emotional experiences." Sarah finished her summary, confident she was pointing her company in the right direction.

"Excuse me." Sarah turned her head, surprised. The new hire, Danica, had her hand tentatively raised. "I'm curious to know how the number of outliers compares to previous

survey data. And is there any other information connected to these outliers, like neighborhood or purchase location?"

Sarah was caught off guard. She hadn't really considered the information from that perspective.

"That's a really good question, Danica. There are actually a few more outliers than in previous data sets, but in proportion to the number of participants, it isn't much higher than normal. We had a lot more data this time around. The outliers are only about 0.4% higher than in previous surveys. And most of the outliers are usually those with higher incomes, not the people we are targeting for our products, who fall more into the middle class."

"I see," Danica acknowledged. "Could .04% be the beginning of a new trend? And are the outliers in this data from higher incomes?"

Jeff chirped up from the other side of the table, "Sarah, didn't you say last time that the number of outliers was .27% higher than the time before? If it is now 0.4% higher, that seems like an increasing trend."

Sarah felt trapped. She hadn't looked at that information. She hadn't had time. She had been confident her experience was enough, and ultimately, she had taken a shortcut. Danica and Jeff were right; she should have looked more carefully. Discouraged, Sarah realized she needed to fix a mistake she hadn't even realized she was making.

Sarah found herself in a situation where she was cramped for time with excess information to sort through. Her responsibility was heavy, and she didn't feel she had adequate resources to carefully examine all the necessary details. So, she took a "mental shortcut," manifesting from what is called a "cognitive bias." It might seem easy to believe Sarah's mistake was attributed to rushed timelines and overconfidence, but the truth is every human experiences what Sarah did in one way or another. Everyone takes different versions of mental shortcuts in all areas of their life.

What Are Cognitive Biases?

The notion of cognitive biases was initially introduced by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman in 1972^{*}. They defined cognitive bias as a tendency for human beings to commit errors in judgment and rationality. People use cognitive biases, or mental shortcuts, to help them sort through the incredible amount of information connected to each decision they must make or experience they have. This process is often unconscious, although not always, taking into consideration a person's memories, previous experience, beliefs, ability to pay attention, and a variety of other factors.

These factors often result in people coming to conclusions that are not completely true, or even rational. In this way, individuals create their own "subjective reality" based on their personal perception of the input they receive. This subjective reality becomes the basis on which they make their choices. If this foundation lacks truth, misses critical information, or is skewed by emotions, the decisions will not be the most beneficial. The impacts of choices made in this manner can cause one to be stuck where they are, unable to move forward, and ultimately wondering why that is so.

Cognitive biases are a natural part of being human, and everyone is subject to them at some point in their life in one area or another. Evolutionarily speaking, they are a survival skill that allowed early humans to jump to conclusions about possible predators, food sources, or safe places to call home. These shortcuts were useful in allowing people to make quick decisions for their well-being and survival. Today, however, jumping to conclusions using cognitive biases causes people "to ceaselessly lead [themselves] astray without realizing it."^{*} How exactly one is led astray depends on the cognitive bias at play and the factor influencing the bias. Two of the biggest influencers are memory and attention.

When memory is a factor in a person's cognitive bias, it can lead to mistakes or oversights that are detrimental to their success. Memory is shaped by emotions connected to an experience. For this reason, inaccuracies often hide the full picture of what happened. For example, a company might decide to hire a consultant to assist with a major project. During

this project, the consultant demonstrated some personality traits that clashed with a couple of the executives involved. Through the course of the project, they were able to see past the personality conflicts in order to see their vision come to fruition. Ultimately, the project was a success, enabling the company to move forward and profit.

At a later date, the company indicated an interest in hiring the same consultant for another large project. The executives who struggled with his personality last time may most vividly remember their difficulty in overcoming his personality and related emotions. In this case, the success of the project fades into the background as they focus on their previous experience, colored by their feelings of discomfort. These people are experiencing a cognitive bias related to memory inaccuracy. It is not inaccurate because they are remembering something wrong; it is inaccurate because it is not the complete truth. As a result of this cognitive bias, they convince the company not to rehire the consultant, making project completion more difficult or even less successful. They often aren't aware of how they come to the conclusion that it is not a good choice to rehire; they simply believe it is not the right choice for the company and the project at hand.

Researchers have also attributed cognitive biases to problems with attention. The human brain simply can't focus on the amount of information it is bombarded with, so attention to detail wanes in the face of quickly making choices. According to Professor Timothy Wilson from the University of Virginia, people are confronted with 11,000,000 pieces of information at any given moment but the brain is only capable of processing 40 pieces of information at one time*.

Whether a person realizes it or not, they are taking in everything that is happening around them: the weather, the temperature of the air, the wind speed, the smells in the air, what each person around them is doing, what their facial expressions are, nervous twitches, the sounds in the surrounding environment, how traffic is or is not moving, the colors of vehicles in that traffic, along with their own physical and emotional information. And this is only the beginning of the list. As a result, individuals have to be selective about what they focus on, and the brain assists with this by compressing the process. Instead of solely depending on the information presented at a given time, the brain resorts to using

experience, history, and perceptions to make decisions. In essence, the brain uses similar information to make a decision under the assumption that the retrieved data is as valid and reliable as the actual data presented. However, this is not always the case, and people, therefore, succumb to the consequences of biased thinking.

Memory and attention issues that result in cognitive biases happen because a person's brain simplifies information processing, creating mental shortcuts that make it easier to live and make decisions in a timely manner*. The brain is the command center for all the bodily functions that keep people alive and more often than not, it does its job without human awareness. This lack of awareness is necessary as it can be distracting to be constantly conscious of blinking or breathing. The same principle follows for all mental processes as the brain processes information quickly and efficiently to allow people to be as successful as possible in their endeavors. However, as previously stated, these evolutionary skills are not always beneficial in the modern world, and it is crucial to be aware of how cognitive biases impact decisions. People can take control of the processes they take for granted, like breathing, by using strategies like meditation or conscious breathing exercises. These strategies are beneficial for improving one's focus and attention as well as managing stress and anxiety*. Just as one can take control of physical processes, one can also take control of cognitive processes by bringing awareness to them and implementing strategies to counter them.

Cognitive Biases In The Workplace?

As unconscious processes, cognitive biases are often missed. In fact, the conclusions people reach usually seem rational in the moment*. After all, they stem from previous experiences and knowledge, which are sound considerations when making a decision. As such, biases hide in the shadows of people's choices, leading them to believe they are thinking rationally about the information they are sorting through when they are not being rational at all. Sarah's story reflects a common experience—people take mental shortcuts that seem reasonable, and so are left unquestioned until someone recognizes the error or offers a different perspective. Without awareness, these shortcuts often lead to overlooking

information, missed opportunities, and sometimes even unwise choices. These may be unseen mistakes that consequently can't be addressed, often leading people to feel stuck and unable to move forward in their lives or their careers.

Cognitive biases span every area of life, from the personal to the professional, and impact relationships, finances, hiring practices, policies, and expectations. Without awareness, they can't be recognized. However, when people recognize biases in their lives, they can start to counter them, and make more effective decisions in their life and career.

Bias Manifestation At Work

People are surrounded by a wealth of information every moment of every day, and must choose what to do with this information in their particular situation. Sometimes it is simply deciding that the excess stimulation needs to be shut out by closing an office door.

Sometimes, however, it is a more significant choice, like where to invest a large amount of company money. No matter the complexity of a decision, multiple factors come into play, stimulating cognitive biases.

Most companies expect their employees and managers to produce measurable results, be innovative, and propel the company forward financially in a way that establishes a solid reputation in the industry. These job pressures motivate individuals to succeed in their work, and the experiences related to these expectations ignite emotional responses and belief structures that trigger cognitive biases. In discussing inherent cognitive biases, Brian Nosek, a scientist, describes how the expectations for multiple notable published works in quick succession provide "the mind excellent motivation to find what it is primed to find." He posits that there is no conscious effort to find meaning where there is no meaning, or support for a hypothesis when no valid support exists*. It is simply the brain doing what it is meant to do by finding patterns or reasoning that it thinks will be beneficial. In addition to motivation for success, the pressure to perform can hinder the brain's ability to process information, resulting in further mental shortcuts that impact other areas of one's job.

These shortcuts are used in multiple fields in almost every area of one's job. Studies in the medical field reveal that cognitive biases are responsible for "up to 75% of errors in internal medicine." These mistakes exist in all stages of the diagnostic process*. These errors can lead to serious consequences for doctors and patients, and the lessons learned in the medical study are applicable to other fields. In a one-hour interview, it is easy to fall into making assumptions and jump to conclusions about a potential employee. There just isn't enough information about a person to know for sure whether or not they are the right candidate, so the brain uses shortcuts to help make the decision. For example, one may be prone to hiring like-minded employees and may determine an applicant to be like-minded when reading their résumé and identifying with their educational background and/or career trajectory. One may come to this conclusion during the interview based on the applicant's appearance and language. Although judgments during the hiring process are necessary, they need to be mitigated to limit bias in the hiring process to increase diversity, which offers unique and fresh perspectives to an organization. Similarly, when faced with the opportunity to expand a business by investing in a growing company, excess information will likely need to be sifted through—financial records, company policies, employee portfolios, and legal documentation. In light of so much information, the brain will use cognitive biases to help make a decision that may ignore consequential information, leading to an unwise choice to either invest or not.

Biases can also be present in more nuanced ways that may not seem to have an obvious impact. For example, a person may choose not to voice their opinion in a meeting because everyone else seems to disagree with their point of view. Instead of challenging the status quo, they may simply sit silently, pretending they agree. The immediate impact of this behavior seems harmless. In reality, it could be costing the organization and preventing forward movement, even for the employees themselves. Challenging ideas, opinions, and expectations in educated and thoughtful discussions is often what breaks the ground for innovation. Overcoming biases can help people reach their potential more easily. There is no end to the decisions people make daily, so ensuring awareness of cognitive biases and how they impact people's choices is key to moving forward and seeing greater success.

Due to the nuanced nature of biases, people often do not recognize these mental shortcuts in themselves; they are inherent in how people process the world around them and translate smoothly into their behavior. It may be easier to see them at play in the lives of colleagues, friends, or even family before one sees them in their own life. This isn't a bad place to begin awareness, but if individuals do not regularly reflect on personal behavior and the choices they make, they will never gain awareness of how cognitive biases play into their daily lives. And as much as one might like to think that they are self-aware and make conscious choices to be the best they can be, it is estimated that only 10-15% of people actually demonstrate self-awareness. This is a staggeringly low statistic, and unfortunately so. The benefits of being self-aware have been shown to be invaluable in the workplace. Self-awareness fosters better relationships, enables clearer communication, increases creativity and confidence, establishes foundations for wiser choices, and sets the stage for greater profit*.

With such great benefits at stake, it is critical to become aware of one's cognitive biases so they can be countered. Even though they are a natural part of information processing, they aren't impossible to recognize, oppose, and overcome. Several indicators reveal when biases are at work. Any of the following indicators are a suitable initial measuring stick for whether or not someone is falling prey to cognitive biases in their life:

- only focusing on information that confirms existing opinions
- negating responsibility when things don't go the way they were intended by blaming others or external factors
- following the actions, opinions, and beliefs of perceived role models without question
- attributing personal success to superior skill while attributing the success of others to luck
- believing in personal objectivity and unbiased thinking that surpasses that of others
- assuming that personal opinions or beliefs are shared by everyone in a group
- easily forming judgments due to overconfidence in one's capacity to think clearly and rationally

Although these indicators can be useful in letting someone know they are being influenced by cognitive biases, they can still be missed. People must take an honest, sometimes brutal

look at their actions and ways of thinking to truly recognize these indicators. It isn't easy, but once someone can identify the various biases, they will be able to overcome them.

Overcoming The Unconscious

With an increased awareness of cognitive biases, people can adopt strategies to overcome them. Research suggests that cognitive training, specifically cognitive bias modification, can help minimize cognitive biases in thinking*. The initial steps in this process consist of having a heightened awareness of biases. People need to train themselves to think about how their biases might influence their thinking and ultimately their decision-making. In other words, people must form the habit of questioning the way they are thinking about the information they are processing. For example, when a person meets someone new, they form a judgment. Before accepting their initial judgment as truth, they need to ask what biases might be at play in their judgment. A previous experience with someone of the same generation may be coloring their perception. Common stereotypes may be getting in the way of seeing the person in a true light. If this question can be answered honestly, the actions following the meeting will reflect better choices for the relationship.

After the initial steps of questioning are mastered, people can strengthen their self-awareness and consequently their ability to overcome biases by implementing more targeted strategies. Coming up with a ritual series of questions that force the objective examination of information can be a helpful tool to ensure mental shortcuts don't take control of the decision-making process. When clinicians were forced to use a mnemonic tool to help them question their diagnostic choices, they were more likely to change their minds about the final judgment. In the case of this study, the mnemonic tool was the word SLOW*. The word itself reminded the doctors not to rush to conclusions while the phrases associated with each letter asked the questions that helped them identify if and how cognitive biases played a role in their diagnostic process (sure about that; look at the data; what if the opposite is true; worst case scenario/what else could it be). The questions ranged from examining their surety to challenging the initial judgment by asking them to look at the opposite of their diagnosis. The tool forced them to look at the data rather than

make judgments based on their meeting with the patient (78.9% of errors made were related to patient contact)*. Just as the clinicians had to slow down to think about their decisions, so, too, must anyone else. The same questions can be applied to any judgment or decision. People can ask themselves:

- Am I sure about this? What makes me sure/unsure?
- Am I missing any information or possibilities?
- Am I favoring some factors over others? What reasons do I have for favoring them?
- Am I ignoring any information because it doesn't align with what I think?
- What if the truth is the opposite of what I think?
- What are the worst consequences of my decision, and what else could I do?

Asking "what" at the end of each question is an excellent way to increase self-awareness*. Asking "what" forces one to think more deeply about the cause of an action, event, or belief. It gets one to explore more than one factor, which is vital when exploring how the brain processes multiple pieces of information; there is rarely a single influencing factor.

Another way to increase self-awareness and combat cognitive biases is through interaction with people who maintain different values, beliefs, and ways of life. These interactions force one to become accountable for how they think. When conversing with someone who has a different perspective, one is usually more careful in approaching a conversation, understanding that one's decisions, beliefs, values, and viewpoints will be examined by others. One has to justify positions in the conversation if the intent is to enter into a genuine relationship. Engaging in relationships that challenge one's thinking, rather than simply confirm it, develops a heightened sense of self and allows one to become more aware of the biases that pervade their thinking and decision-making. Additionally, interaction with individuals who are different enables one to notice positive examples of behavior that contradict their preconceived notions. Research shows that bias responds to current input and the new experiences effectively replace the old knowledge thus creating positive new patterns and generalizations*. In her article *Fooling Ourselves*, Regina Nuzzo calls this accountability having a "team of rivals." Allowing one's ideas to pass before those with distinctly different ideas and values provides the opportunity to have flaws in logic or reasoning pointed out. They can offer other explanations and perspectives and ask

questions that force one to examine the reasoning behind their thinking*. With this strategy, it becomes easier to be skeptical of one's conclusions, think more critically about their circumstances, gain new experiences that override older ones, and ultimately become self-aware in a way that leads to success.

The role that memory plays in activating cognitive bias cannot be ignored. Since memory is related to the emotions of an experience, each person's memory of an event is subjective, often distorting the truth. As a result, it is imperative to reduce dependence on memory when it comes to making decisions and solidifying beliefs. The distortion of memory based on a person's experience is illustrated in the "Lost in the Mall" study by Elizabeth Loftus*. This study used a memory implantation technique to demonstrate that confabulations, or false memories, can be created through suggestion. Loftus and her research assistant supplied participants with written accounts of four of their childhood experiences. To these four experiences, she added the false experience of getting lost in a mall. She asked participants to identify which of the five events was false. Twenty-five percent of the participants failed to identify that getting lost in a mall was a false memory. Instead, these people remembered the experience and elaborated on the event as though it had occurred in reality. The study also suggested that false memory is formed when the event in question is incorporated into an existing memory, in this case, going to the mall. The results clearly demonstrated that people unconsciously create false memories based on the emotions connected to a real experience. For example, a child who goes to a busy mall may feel overwhelmed and even afraid of being separated from their parent in the crowd of people. The anxiety connected to this real experience is incorporated into the suggestion that they did get lost, and the brain works to create a story that matches the new information to the emotional experience.

Not every memory people have is false, and not every memory is hugely distorted. However, with the passage of time, it is difficult for people to retrieve accurate information. This means that when someone must make decisions at the present time, it is necessary to consider how memory biases might be impacting a person's inclinations. Although there may be pressure to make a quick decision, it is imperative to slow the process down to

ensure a wise choice is made. If there are records of the situation brought to light by the present, reviewing those factual and objective records can help one gain a clear picture of reality. It may also help to speak to people who were there during the event in question. Being transparent with one's thought processes and reasoning allows others to offer their insights at the same time that it increases self-awareness*.

Researchers have stated that when someone is specific in their intent, it can lead to overcoming biases. It is not enough for someone to say that they will stop being biased; they must act on this intent. Just as the clinicians who used the mnemonic tool SLOW to counter cognitive biases found their mistakes more easily, often changing their minds about the initial diagnosis, others can use strategies to counter their biases*. Business people can ask colleagues to play devil's advocate, or they can come up with a list of questions to ask themselves in instances where they are particularly prone to taking mental shortcuts.

It can be intimidating to bring someone else into the self-discovery process, so it might feel easier to begin the process without accountability to others. If one is determined to become more self-aware and to move forward in the areas where cognitive biases are holding back their progress, then using the strategy of psychological self-distancing can be helpful. The concept of psychological self-distancing is based on the notion that one can step back from their situation, depersonalizing it in order to gauge it accurately. When a person psychologically steps back, they do not respond immediately; they acknowledge their surroundings and reflect on a course of action. By taking time and space to respond, a person can increase the distance from their egocentric perspective by assessing events and the emotions that they experience*. Removing the personal from the scenario and viewing it as though it is happening to someone else helps one see clearly. A common way to remove oneself from the scenario at hand is to ask themselves what advice they would give to a friend if they were in a similar situation. Another way is to avoid using first-person language when asking questions, examining their motives from a third-person perspective. For example, instead of asking, "Why did I assume the new guy would be late?" ask, "Why did Jack assume the new guy would be late?" When someone does these things, it allows them to think about consequences in a way they otherwise wouldn't. For example, they can

reflect on how their feedback would make a subordinate feel prior to sending out an unnecessarily harsh email stemming from an emotional response.

Once people become aware and accept that there are things influencing their decisions, they need to focus on actively challenging these biases. The questions outlined earlier can be integrated into one's decision-making process. If one can objectively answer these questions, they can effectively gain awareness of their biases and realign their thinking to be bias-free. All the strategies that have been discussed are underpinned by the idea of self-awareness and developing an intimate knowledge of what influences one's thinking. This knowledge leads to changed behavior and changed results.

Neither Good, Bad Nor Ugly

Although it might be easy to label the outcomes of cognitive biases as "bad" or even negatively judge those they influence, it is paramount to resist this urge. Cognitive biases don't make bad or good people; despite the negative results that can occur when these mental shortcuts are used, they aren't inherently bad. Instead, people must recognize that they are a natural part of human thought and common to all people. They can even have positive outcomes at times. Reframing how one sees their world is difficult, and believing that mental shortcuts are bad only makes that process more difficult.

Though they shouldn't be seen as bad, cognitive biases aren't good, either; they just are. They may result in unreasonable, irrational, or even inaccurate choices, beliefs, or actions that inhibit progress or stunt innovation, but they also allow for efficiency and survival in a busy world of work. Remembering that they are part of a survival instinct humanity is still overcoming can help reframe cognitive biases*. The evolution of the brain and body is a much slower process than the evolution of society and technology, creating a gap in the way the brain works. Understanding how cognitive biases work can help bridge that gap, ultimately propelling people forward faster than evolution. Elon Musk, the CEO of Tesla, posted an infographic from TitleMax titled, "50 cognitive biases to be aware of so you can be the very best version of you."* His tweet highlights the fact that being aware of cognitive

biases and learning how to work through them can lead to personal and professional success.

Recognizing this reality allows for self-compassion as one tackles the difficult task of changing the way they think and act. When one understands that their tendencies are common to all humans, they are less likely to beat themselves up when they identify one at play in their thinking. In Sarah's story, she was held accountable for her assumptions by a colleague. Although that was a hard moment for her, ultimately, she was able to identify her mistake without self-judgment. Instead, she could reassess the data and create a more accurate picture of the market for her company. Cognitive biases may cause a person to stumble, but they don't have to be one's downfall.

Although the brain's processing leads people into biases, it is also the tool that can guide them out of biased thought processes. Just like learning to bring attention to the automatic biological process of breathing through meditation or deep-breathing exercises, people need to slow down their decision-making and bring it into conscious awareness, allowing them to perceive information differently. This new reality could cause some uneasiness and discomfort, but that is only more reason to lean in and work hard to tackle these biases.

Action Steps

By understanding that cognitive biases are an inherent part of information processing, you can begin to examine typical work scenarios where cognitive biases may come into play. You need to start becoming aware of these biases around you in order to learn the strategies that allow you to overcome them. Take a moment and think about times in your life, specifically at work, when you have felt discomfort. How might that feeling be related to a cognitive bias, either present in yourself or someone else? Take note of it and use that experience to help frame your continued reading.