

The Impact of Brain Bias

Imagine you just bought a new apartment. You are proud of your achievement and have invited some friends around to celebrate with you. There are plenty of accolades coming thick and fast. Adjectives such as spacious, airy and light are appreciated. One person in the group comments: "It's a very busy main road. Do you find the traffic noise irritating?" The only thing irritating you is the question. You feel affronted and answer "No, it's actually very quiet." You love your new apartment and the area. You tell yourself the comment was a little dig at you as a result of jealousy.

Known as negative bias, psychologists will tell us that it is common to feel a greater impact from the negative suggestions directed towards us, compared to the positives. In fact, even the most optimistic among us are susceptible to negative bias. It is said that the average person needs to hear five positive comments for every one negative comment, just to end up feeling neutral. Why is this so?

Our sensitivity to the negative is considered our default setting. The human brain is wired to respond to negative suggestion, over positive suggestion. Research has shown that we produce more electrical activity in our brain in response to bad news, compared to good news. This translates into our ability to process the negative more quickly than the positive, leading to faster and stronger reactions to information perceived as negative. This may explain why we can remember negative feedback from decades ago, or why previous negative comments may come to the fore when we are upset with someone.

The impact of negative suggestion ignites in us the instinctive desire to find meaning in the suggestion. For example, in your performance review, you are told that you need to improve your communication skills with your colleagues. This information is offered amongst a range of positive feedback about your performance. Chances are, while the review is positive overall, your brain is processing the possible implications of the negative. Does this mean that I can't apply for the management job? Are my team mates backstabbing me? Is my job secure?

It can be of benefit to overcome our negative default setting, in order to more accurately scan the landscape for solutions and opportunities. Negative suggestions usually have far more influence on us than positive suggestions. Below are strategies we can practice to help us more effectively highlight positive suggestions and minimise the undue amplification of negative suggestions.

1. Keep an open mind

Listen to all the information in the exchange. Assess the information in total, rather than concentrating only on the negative. Ask yourself: what are the opportunities or positive implications from this dialogue?

2. Consider intent

In the new apartment scenario, it is possible that what was perceived as a rude suggestion of inadequacy may have been motivated by entirely different intent. Our friend may have asked about the noise, not with the intention of being insulting, but because she is actually looking to buy an apartment on a busy road and wants to understand the impact. By identifying the intention of an exchange, we will frequently find that what initially appears negative is not intended to be negative at all.

3. Recognise your desired outcome

Contemplate the big picture. Someone may have offended or upset you. You need to know how you want this relationship to proceed. If the subject matter is important to you, you may want to address it in a calm and constructive manner. If it isn't important to you or your desired outcome, you

may prefer to overlook it and move on. Either way, you must construct the best way forward based on the outcome you want. This method will always prove more successful than reacting in the moment and venting your emotions.

An understanding of instinctive negative bias in humans can help us navigate with expertise through situations of perceived criticism. It can also help us understand the best ways to provide constructive feedback to others. When giving feedback, consider the most important aspects that you wish to communicate. Ensure that the positives are always emphasised, and information on the areas of improvement are delivered in a productive and helpful way.

Negative bias can generate anger, sadness, confusion and stress. It can also fracture relationships, limit opportunities and feed insecurities. The more skilled we are at identifying and managing those biases, to move us more towards the positive, the happier we will be in our professional and our personal lives. 💡

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