

## **You Are Never Totally Objective**

**by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP**

I originally intended to have the title for this article read “How Do You Know When You Are Biased.” The more I thought about it, the more 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.

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

One place to observe bias is when managers try to measure accurately 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 the lens of how he or she feels about the employee. It would be impossible to factor out personal biases, but by recognizing that there is the certainty of being biased, 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 the objective 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.

Another area where we struggle to be objective is when thinking about political issues. We are bombarded by information that is presented with strong biases already marinated 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. Just for fun I often listen to the news on a network known for having the opposite bias to my own. It is a kind of jarring exercise as I quickly see the how their biases are strikingly “wrong” only to realize that it could be mine 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, and the good news is that you can never get your opinion wrong. The bad news is that your opinion will never be totally objective, so 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 and replace it with a button that says, “I have an opinion on that – what’s yours?”

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