Debiasing Thinking

Idea In Short

Smart people make predictable mistakes. They anchor on the first number, seek evidence that fits their view, and feel more certain than the facts justify. Knowing about these biases helps less than most managers expect, so researchers have studied deliberate counterstrategies that change how decisions get made. Debiasing equips decision makers with awareness, training, and tools, while related approaches redesign the setting so that errors become less likely. Techniques such as considering the opposite and holding a premortem have support from experiments and field use. This article explains the main strategies, shows how to build them into routines, and cautions that most organizations still have no institutionalized process for countering bias.

A leadership team approves a plan to enter a new market. Everyone in the room has seen the same growth chart, and nobody wants to be the person who slows things down. A facilitator asks the group to imagine that it is eighteen months later and the entry has failed. Within minutes, people list reasons that had stayed unspoken: no local partner, thin margins, a competitor's likely response.

What debiasing is

Debiasing is the effort to reduce predictable errors in judgment. A review in the Journal of Management, by Fasolo, Heard, and Scopelliti, separates two approaches that mitigate bias through distinct mechanisms: debiasing and choice architecture. It explains that debiasing works by directly equipping decision makers with bias awareness, training, or tools to recognize and counter the influence of biases on their judgment and decisions.1

Choice architecture, by contrast, changes the setting, such as defaults, sequences, and structures, so that the biased choice is less likely, whatever the individual knows.

Both have a place. Debiasing builds the skill of the person, and choice architecture builds

the support around the person. Leaders who want reliable results use both.

Why awareness is not enough

Many managers assume that learning about biases protects them. The evidence is less kind. A review of debiasing research notes that the identification of intervention methods has mostly followed speculation, and that knowing about a bias alone is not sufficient. Understanding the underlying decision mechanisms has a more direct debiasing effect.

A clinical review of cognitive debiasing describes it as change that rarely comes from a single event and instead moves through stages, from lack of awareness, to awareness, to the ability to detect bias, to considering a change. It recommends teaching about biases and developing specific tools to test for them, and it reports that a consider-the-opposite procedure marginally reduced anchoring in judgments of personality.2

The lesson is practical. A one-hour lecture on biases changes little. A tool used at the moment of decision changes more.

Consider the opposite

The simplest counterstrategy asks you to argue against your own view. Before finalizing a judgment, write down reasons it could be wrong. Then reconsider.

The method targets overconfidence and confirmation bias, which both come from looking only for support. Forcing a search for contrary evidence widens what you see.

Make the step concrete. Ask: What is the strongest case against this option? What would a smart critic say? What evidence would change my mind? Write three answers before you decide.

The premortem

A premortem takes the same idea into projects. Gary Klein described it in Harvard Business Review in 2007. Team members assume that the project they are planning has just failed, and then generate reasons for the failure. Klein notes that research by Mitchell, Russo, and Pennington found that prospective hindsight, imagining that an event has already occurred,

increases the ability to correctly identify reasons for future outcomes by 30 percent.3

The technique works partly because it changes the social rules. In an ordinary kickoff, doubts feel like disloyalty. In a premortem, naming a risk is the assignment, so even junior people contribute.

Run it after the plan exists and before commitments lock in. Give people a few minutes to write reasons silently, then collect them one by one. Rank the reasons and assign changes to the plan.

A menu of techniques

A study from the University of St. Gallen analyzed debiasing techniques used in managerial decisions. Through a card-sorting experiment with practitioners, it found nine clusters of techniques, including checklists, preparation, what-if questions, group debiasing, reasoning by analogy, in-process debiasing, and starting viewpoints. It also reported that most companies lacked institutionalized debiasing processes.4

A briefing prepared for conservation decision makers, from a global conservation organization, describes eight tools to counter bias in organizational decisions and illustrates the problems with everyday examples, such as agreeing with a funding projection because the loudest voice in a meeting offered it, or seeking only studies that support existing beliefs.5

You do not need all the techniques. Pick the ones that match your recurring errors. A team that overestimates timelines needs reference classes, and a team that follows its leader needs independent first votes.

Matching tools to biases

Anchoring: gather independent estimates before anyone speaks, and ask for a range, not a point. Confirmation bias: assign a devil's advocate and require disconfirming evidence. Overconfidence: ask for confidence levels, then compare with outcomes. Planning fallacy: use data from similar past projects as the starting estimate. Groupthink: collect written views before discussion, and let the leader speak last.

Sunk cost: ask, "If we had no history with this project, would we start it today?" Availability: check base rates before reacting to a vivid case.

Keep the list short and visible. A one-page checklist at the front of a decision meeting works better than a long handbook.

Building it into routine

Debiasing works best when it becomes habit. Put the counterstrategy in the template: a section called "Why we might be wrong" in each proposal, or a standing premortem for projects above a set budget.

Assign roles. One person watches for bias in the discussion, and one prepares the strongest opposing case. Rotate the roles so that no one becomes the permanent critic.

Review outcomes. Keep a decision log with predictions and results. When forecasts miss in the same direction, you have found a bias to target.

Limits and open questions

A systematic study of bias mitigation interventions in Frontiers in Psychology examines retention and transfer, which means whether effects last and carry over to new problems. The question matters because many training studies measure effects soon after the intervention and in the same type of task.

Treat claims of lasting change with care. Refreshers, reminders at the moment of choice, and structural support all help, and no single exercise cures bias for good.

Also note that debiasing cannot remove every error. Time pressure, fatigue, and noise affect judgment too. Good processes lower the odds of error. They do not bring them to zero.

Debiasing in group settings

Groups can reduce bias or magnify it. When the most senior person speaks first, others anchor on that view. When people share views one at a time in open discussion, early speakers shape the rest.

Counter this with independent input. Ask each member to write an estimate or a recommendation before discussion, collect them, and compare. Differences become the agenda.

Then structure the debate. Assign one pair to argue each side, and swap sides halfway. The swap makes people understand the strongest form of the view they dislike.

A hypothetical example

Imagine a hypothetical retailer whose store-opening forecasts keep running 25 percent too high. The finance director suspects that sponsors anchor on the best store in their region. The company changes the process. Sponsors submit forecasts only after seeing sales from a set of comparable stores, and a separate team runs a premortem on each proposal.

Over the next year, forecast error falls, and two proposals are withdrawn after the premortem revealed lease risks. The case is invented, but it shows how process changes can address a bias that training alone had not fixed.

Cautions

Do not use bias labels as weapons. Telling a colleague that she is anchored shuts down thought. Ask her to use the tool, and keep the talk about process.

Avoid assuming that you are immune. Experts show the same biases, often with more confidence.

Finally, keep the cost in proportion. Apply heavy debiasing to high-stakes, hard-to-reverse decisions, and keep light checks for the rest.

- 1Mitigating cognitive bias to improve organizational decisions
- 2Cognitive debiasing in clinical decision making
- 3Performing a project premortem
- 4Debiasing techniques for managerial decisions
- 5Briefing on biases and counter-tools

Summary

Debiasing thinking means using deliberate counterstrategies against predictable errors in judgment. Research suggests that awareness alone is not enough, and that effective approaches give decision makers concrete tools, such as considering why an initial view could be wrong, imagining that a project has already failed, or using checklists and group procedures. Leaders can also redesign the decision setting so that biased choices become harder. Surveys of practice suggest many companies lack institutionalized debiasing, and studies of training raise questions about how long effects last. Pick one recurring decision, choose one counterstrategy, build it into the agenda, and check after a month whether it changed what the group said.