

Personal Mid-Course Corrections

Fairness does not go out of fashion

Rick Roll

As advanced as we think we have become, we all remain human. Stated another way, we are all engrained with an array of flaws and shortcomings. Some are subtle while others are overt. They are as much attributes of our personalities as our talents and skills. Adding to our personal complexity is their variability, surging and ebbing as we evolve through our lives. As they say, the only constant is change, and all things are temporary.

Among our flaws are the biases we take with us everywhere. The list of biases is a long one, including expectation bias, confirmation bias, continuation bias, optimism bias, and so on. A corrective mechanism kicks in when the bias is so prominent that it is recognizable by yourself or others. That is a healthy mechanism, interrupting behavior that is leading you off the rails.

More dangerous is the unconscious bias. It is so embedded yet so subtle that we are not even aware of the extent to which it is influencing our judgment. This can manifest in a tendency toward uniformity and erecting soft mental barriers. Avoiding certain neighborhoods, sitting in preferred places during meetings or larger gatherings, and deciding which stranger to start a conversation with at a party all come to mind.

As our grandparents might have preached to us, our rights extend right up to the point where they begin infringing upon someone else's rights. This submerged tendency toward sameness develops into a problem when it colors our decisions that affect the continual turnover of our workforce.

Talent is talent, experience is experience, and motivation is motivation. These are qualities we want, need, and crave in our offices and our facilities. They can be present in anyone, and in a wide range of nationalities, races, genders,



**Talent is talent,
experience is
experience, and
motivation is motivation.
These are qualities we
want, need, and crave
in our offices and our
facilities.**

faiths, political persuasions, and handicaps — visible and otherwise. An ideal, colorblind employee-acquisition process would sift through candidates and select whoever excels at talent, experience, and motivation.

This ideal world is not the one in which we live, nor is it expected to spontaneously develop anytime soon. Individual unconscious bias will tilt the sifting toward suboptimal, unfair results. Even if it is just a small difference, repetition over time can become a self-reinforcing leash, restraining an organization from the potential it will not let itself discover.

If this hard-to-detect tendency is embedded in different individuals to different extents, how can it be neutralized from the decision-making process? Making those hiring decisions in a group setting

is one way, proportionally reducing the influence of any given individual. Diversity within this group is an important aspect, lest groupthink infiltrates their reasoning and justifies some poor choices.

Recognizing a problem is necessary before effectively addressing the problem. Sound familiar? Formal training exists to promote self-awareness of unconscious bias, which is not a bad idea for a great many professional settings. There are online courses we all could begin today. Deeper respect and empathy also might be cultivated in the process. Like fairness, empathy does not go out of fashion, either.

There truly is strength in diversity. This extends to an openness and acceptance of the different forms of diversity that can enrich our professional and personal lives. Occasionally I imagine what the world would be like if everyone thought the same way I do. What a nightmare! That would be a nasty existence, sapping the joy out of life while turning me and my clones into hermits. But even bad dreams can serve a purpose if they remind us to live happier days while we still have days to live. 🦋

Richard R. Roll, P.E., DEE, is a life member of the Water Environment Federation and the New York Water Environment Association.

The views and opinions expressed in Viewpoint are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the official policies of WEF.

Share your opinion. If you have something on your mind that affects the water sector, *WE&T* wants to hear from you! Viewpoint submissions should include your full name, organization, and title; should not exceed 800 words; and may not have been published in another publication. Send Viewpoint submissions to magazine@wef.org.