



## Self-Preservation Biases Serve Self and Influence Decision-Making

There are dozens of biases that impact people's views of the world and their decision-making process. One of the types of biases frequently found in the workplace is self-preservation bias.

Self-preservation bias, also called self-serving bias, is a bias in which people attribute positive events to their own character and qualities and attribute negative events to other people or external factors. This particular bias produces a tendency for people to interpret ambiguous information in a way that is self-serving. When self-preservation bias is at play in the workplace, employees do not take responsibility for negative dealings, including in direct orders, relationships, and results. Without the acceptance of responsibility there is no change. In the workplace, self-preservation bias is seen in action when people blame conflicts or poor judgment on other people, impeding possible resolution.

### Giving Credit Where Credit is Due

Self-preservation bias develops as a means of protecting self-esteem when events and interactions do not align with goals or personal beliefs, creating psychological tension or dissonance. Over time, people experiencing dissonance, as they respond to reactions to personal judgments and decisions, go through a long psychological change process to reduce the dissonance. It is self-preservation in action, leading to a personal bias in which everyone else is at fault, thus resolving the internal discomfort. This is a reduction strategy in which people modify their beliefs to feel better about themselves or to preserve a personal image. They attribute their successes to personal strengths or effort while laying blame for failure on other people or external factors. For example, a manager failing to meet goals will lay blame on other unit managers or on being "forced" to hire diverse employees. It is also seen in people working in groups. One person takes credit for the successful efforts of the group in order to enhance self-esteem.

Like most biases, self-preservation bias is multi-faceted. People may have honest and admitted control over situations and be less likely to have self-preservation bias for the simple reason they believe their actions are important to outcomes and accept full responsibility. However, some people tend to believe they are always victims of circumstances and have little control over end-results so are obviously more likely to develop self-preservation bias following failure. People who are self-preserving are motivated to either maintain self-worth or to preserve their concept of who they are. Failures are difficult to absorb internally so external blame is placed.

### Balancing Self

It is intrinsic to human nature to strive for self-actualization, requiring reconciliation when psychological dissonance occurs. Business leaders self-actualize through status and power for the



most part. While moving along the career path and exercising decision making authority, the decisions are influenced by biases based on beliefs, ethics, morals, experiences, and so on. When it is time to make a decision, people rely on their values, and values are self-preserving, dictating conduct and serving as the foundation for behaviors. People in organizations rely on managers to use good judgment when making decisions that impact their lives and organizational performance. When cognitive bias or self-serving bias enters the picture, decisions are riddled with errors based on thought factors rather than good judgment based on evidence.

Specifically in the workplace, there are many ways self-preservation bias impacts decision-making. Managers may blame other units for deadlines missed or improper work results when the fault lies with the manager choosing to withhold instructions. When a minority employee does not get an expected promotion, the manager blames the employee rather than admitting fault lies with the manager who decided to not follow policies or procedures. A team leader blames everything that goes wrong on external factors rather than lack of effective team guidance.

#### Assessing Risks Through a Personal Lens

Self-preservation bias goes beyond blame. In the decision-making realm it can lead to making choices that harm people and the organization as a whole. For example, self-preservation bias can influence how organizational and personal risks are viewed. Leadership will assess external risks but tend to ignore personal or team (internal) faults or shortcomings. The biases can also influence how leaders approach external job candidates. If the manager has biases towards diverse external job candidates because they are seen as risky hires, the organization perpetuates its lack of diversity.

It is also a fact that self-preservation biases can have a major influence on the administration of performance pay and talent management processes. Managers responsible for distributing compensation and rewards, and who are protecting their status in the organization with a bias that over-inflates their worth, are much more likely to give themselves bonuses, promotions, pay increases, and so on. Executives, senior leaders, and managers will attribute organizational successes to their efforts while minimizing the efforts of others.

#### Biases Reflecting a Lifetime

These are just a few examples of self-preservation biases at play in the workplace. It is challenging to convince people to correct biases. Initially, the decision-makers must understand the type of cognitive biases that are influencing their view of the world. Cognitive biases cannot be eliminated. It is a fallacy to believe that they can because they are ingrained over a lifetime.

However, it is possible to help people understand their tendencies to make judgment errors based on their thoughts. A manager who associates diverse employees with high risk performance can develop the cognitive skills through training to stop the thoughts and rethink the risks. Cognitive biases, of which self-preservation is one, are compelling because they reflect a lifetime of culture, relationships, and lifestyles. People with self-preservation biases filter information or cognitive



inputs in a way that protects their self-view. The net result is that leaders are not making decisions with all the information needed to make the best decisions.

The difficulty in changing self-preservation biases means that some people will respond to training, but others will not. One suggestion is that critical decisions only be made with input from other people in order to inject rationality and impartiality. A caveat is that people change only when they want to change. Is tough love needed in organizations to make more progress towards adapting to the global, diverse business environment? It is a question every business should be asking if it intends on maintaining sustainable competitiveness. Ignoring biases only embeds them deeper.