Why we should fight our own self-serving bias at the workplace

Hold a healthy and balanced view of your actions and the behaviour and motivations of those you work alongside. PHOTO | FOTOSEARCH

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Most of us prefer to think of ourselves as impartial judges on the talent of those around us. We like to believe that when we gaze upon a scenario involving family, friends, or coworkers, that we assess them with fairness and balance.

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Humans stand apart as sentient social beings, not pack animals like wolves or solitary creatures like leopards. We see our value and identity in comparison to the social fabric around us. Human psychology, after all, strongly favours equity and fairness.

We desire others to treat us equitably and we, in turn, usually believe, often misguidedly, that we are fair in our dealings with everyone else.

So, when we perceive unfair actions by others towards us, we experience psychological dissonance. We become unsettled, demotivated, and put in less effort as a result of felt bias.
We perceive bias either personally, like with employers, or collectively, like whatever social identifying factor unites individuals through geography, nationality, profession, ethnicity, etc.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines bias as a tendency to believe that some people or ideas exist as better than others that usually results in treating some people unfairly.

Inasmuch, if we swoop down to a micro level and examine a situation of Waweru working in Lavington, who feels that he performs admirably as a project manager at an NGO, but in performance review after performance review, his boss, the program manager, repeatedly rates him on a two out of a five point accomplishment scale.

One aspect that Waweru repeatedly receives criticism on involves his harsh tones that he takes with his subordinate staff. He finds the assessments hypocritical since Waweru perceives that his boss acts stricter than him.

However, in a motivational survey of all staff at the NGO, employees rate both Waweru and his boss as equally severe. So he suffers from personal bias. His pro-self-bias taints his observations of the situation. He fails to see his own faults and in turn only sees the faults of others.

Further, when his boss and others point out Waweru’s errors, he claims situational reasons for each misstep: “I was having a bad day”, “The deadline gave me pressure”, etc. In such occurrences, he moves to self-serving bias.

Dr Alice Boyes details self-serving bias as people’s tendency to attribute positive events to their own character but rather ascribe negative events to external factors.

Such thought patterns represent a common type of psychological cognitive bias that researchers study in social psychology, industrial psychology, organisational behaviour, and human resources literature.

Now, let us turn the scenario personal. If you were to drive the eight minutes from Nairobi city centre to USIU, as an example, and a matatu cut you off in traffic as you exited near Garden City, you would likely proclaim something to your passengers that the particular matatu driver is selfish.

However, once you reach Safari Park and then you cut off a motorbike as you make a left turn, then you likely would state that the motorbike did something wrong or use the excuse to yourself that you are running late.

You, therefore, would demonstrate self-serving bias thoughts.
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Researchers also, sadly, often find self-serving bias even amongst pious religious individuals. Sometimes the faithful “cherry pick” convenient Biblical, Quranic, or Vedas passages that espouse their own behaviour but select other verses that condemn the actions of others.

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A misogynist, as an example, may exploit the holy texts to promote a downtrodden view of women in society while ignoring the litany of verses that highlight the important role of women and proper behaviour for men.

Now, take the time to make a mental map of those in your office that you frequently interact with on a daily basis. Write down all the behaviours that you notice, including your own, from tardy arrivals, complaining coworkers, delayed reports, or positive ones such as friendly attitudes and warm hospitality.

Then, in a second column, list next to each behaviour who on your team displays such conduct, including yourself. Next in a third column, write down why such behaviours occur.

The behavioural mind map assists someone to understand and predict deeds and expected conduct. But it also helps the writer to view their own self-serving biases.

Usually the employee authoring the mind-map sees the positive behaviour that they exhibit as fantastic internal strengths that shine through at the workplace and elsewhere in life.
The same employee then proclaims their own negative conduct as the result of other uncontrollable aspects in the workplace.
An observant staff would start to see their own bias through the behavioural mind mapping process. Self-awareness represents a first step towards eradicating self-serving bias from a manager or employee.

Another antidote for your own self-serving bias includes self-compassion and compassion for others.

Intentionally find time each week to think what those around you go through.

“Why does Jane behave that way in the office? Could her daughter’s illness contribute to her missed deadlines?”, as an example.

The three psychological components to compassion include mindfulness, kindness, and sensing common humanity.

Once you become more self-compassionate and compassionate for others, you increase your internal self-improvement mechanism and decrease your defensiveness against criticism.

You then enhance your own prosocial behaviour, which in turn makes you a better manager and a happier individual.

In summary, fight your own self-serving bias.

Hold a healthy and balanced view of your actions and the behaviours and motivations of those you work alongside.

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