

Preventing Bias in Your Decision Making

Cognitive bias can creep up in all areas of a school leader's job. Here are some examples of where leaders might run into challenges and ways to combat those biases for more equitable outcomes.

Confirmation Bias

How it can show up: A principal believes a veteran teacher is highly effective and dismisses concerns about that teacher's performance from others.

Ways to counter it: When reviewing all teachers' performance, principals can make sure to look at all feedback, not just their own observations and opinions. Principals should also hold timely and regular observations of all staff—new and veteran teachers alike—which can help inform a more accurate assessment of teacher performance and not just rely on past information and assumptions.

In-Group Favoritism

How it can show up: A superintendent who spent most of their career as a middle school principal unconsciously favors other leaders with similar backgrounds (i.e., middle school assistant principals over elementary assistant

principals) when making decisions about leadership development opportunities.

Ways to counter it: A leader should be both purposeful and structured when evaluating staff, recommending promotions, and offering leadership opportunities. This means intentionally seeking out diverse talent and making decisions based on merit rather than familiarity, as well as using clear, objective criteria for evaluations and standardizing decision-making processes to ensure both fairness and transparency.

Anchoring Bias

How it shows up: A district leader becomes fixated on an initial school budget proposal and finds it difficult to adjust based on new data, even when that data shows that a different distribution of resources would be more effective.

Ways to counter it: Collect data from multiple sources and delay making final decisions until all data have been reviewed and discussed. In some cases, it might even be beneficial to delay reviewing any data until there are multiple sources available. Make a habit of questioning initial assumptions and be open to revisiting decisions when fresh perspectives become available.

Commitment Bias

How it shows up: A superintendent continues to fund an outdated reading or math intervention program despite ample data showing that it is ineffective because changing to a new initiative feels like admitting failure or showing a lack of fidelity.

Ways to counter it: Conduct periodic program evaluations to objectively assess their effectiveness. Much like the use of formative assessments in the classroom to gauge the effectiveness of instruction and the quality of student learning, periodic program evaluations help leaders make incremental decisions about program effectiveness and reduce the risk of sticking with a failing endeavor. Current evidence should carry more decision-making weight than past evidence, and leaders must be willing to pivot when the data supports doing so.

False Choice Fallacy

How it shows up: A principal believes they must either enforce student discipline in a strict, no-nonsense way or in an entirely student-centered manner, when a blend of the two would allow them to incorporate structure and allow for student voice.



Ways to counter it: Seek out multiple solutions through collaboration. Solicit diverse perspectives to understand all the potential paths you can take to solve a problem.

Fundamental Attribution Error

How it shows up: A principal categorizes a struggling teacher as lazy or unmotivated without considering other factors such as training, resources, peer support, or even personal challenges, or believes a habitually tardy student is irresponsible, rather than considering the barriers that may be impacting them.

Ways to counter it: Dig deeper to uncover the root causes of behaviors rather than making quick judgments based on assumptions. Apply this not only to student behavior, but also how you interpret the actions of staff and other stakeholders. Build genuine relationships. When leaders take the time to develop trust and understand individuals' unique circumstances, they move beyond surface-level explanations and gain deeper insight into the challenges influencing behavior. Create time for open dialogue, which fosters an environment where people feel seen and supported, reducing the likelihood of relying on stereotypes or oversimplifications.

—Wayne A. Hickman