

WORDS ON WISE MANAGEMENT

Oh, snap! How abrupt judgments affect leader decision making

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While we like to think of ourselves as rational leaders, we often make quick decisions based on inaccurate perceptions and mental errors. Decision makers need to be particularly mindful of the limits on rationality because their judgments affect people's careers.

Consider the barrage of stimuli constantly bombarding our five senses. To manage the volume, our brains must focus on salient inputs and filter out the rest. A woman shouting at a colleague is more likely to catch our attention than the rug beneath her feet, the sound of leaf blowers outside the office, or the room's temperature. The ability to filter what's important and ignore the rest allows us to function in daily life.

Meaning-making machines

In addition to the filtering ability, we need a sense of psychological safety to function well in our daily lives. One way we do that is to assign meaning to what we take in and categorize as relevant. Attributing causality gives us a feeling of control and positions us to plan for the future. While we would likely walk across a taupe berber rug without noticing its color and texture, seeing one colleague shout at another would likely catch our attention and trigger questions like, "Why is this happening?" and "What should I do?"

If people were unemotional, detached observers, then the reasons assigned to others' behaviors might be rational. However, our motives, values, and life experiences affect how we filter and assess what input is worthy of the mental process required to assign causality. Thus, our rationality is limited.

Although a variety of errors and biases plays into what we take in and how we explain events, fundamental attribution error (FAE) is one of the most pervasive. The FAE is our tendency to explain others' behaviors in terms of internal qualities such as personality and attitudes rather than situational causes. For example, a driver cuts across lanes in heavy traffic. An immediate reaction may be to label him as reckless rather than consider external factors

leading to his behavior ("he's rushing to handle a family emergency"). So we are not only meaning-making machines but imperfect data processors as well.

Improving decision making

In truth, behaviors result from a mix of personal characteristics and situational factors. Noticing our thoughts—specifically, the reasons we invent to explain others' behaviors—can improve our ability to make rational decisions. We can start by considering how our values and experiences have us focus on, and assign meaning to, certain behaviors. For example, if you were raised in an environment where being "on time" meant arriving early, you are more likely to notice colleagues who show up late than people whose backgrounds didn't emphasize timeliness. Being aware of our perceptual biases is the first step in identifying assumptions that lead to inaccurate (or at least, incomplete) decisions about other people.

Next, we can pay attention to the rationales used to explain others' behaviors. Jack is consistently 5 to 10 minutes late to the weekly staff meeting. Is it because he doesn't care and lacks time management skills (internal, dispositional attributions) or because he has another meeting just before, with a five-minute walk between the offices (external, situational attribution), or both, or neither? This is important because the reasons we associate with Jack's behavior determine how we will interact with and treat him. Without talking to Jack, we don't know.

Although making snap judgments is an unconscious process that allows us to filter, focus, and function in our daily lives, putting too much weight on them can lead to erroneous decisions. Remembering that behavior is a combination of both internal and external factors can pause our meaning-making machinery until we get the facts needed to make rational decisions. That is particularly important for managers who must evaluate employees in ways that affect their careers and futures.



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