



COGNITIVE BIAS AND LIFE IN A BUBBLE

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I've just returned from the International Association of Facilitators (IAF) Asia conference, held this year in beautiful Hualien in Taiwan. Great conference 260+ delegates from 17 countries and a fabulous program.

One of the workshops I attended was on cognitive biases led by Shawn Chung. The workshop was a well-designed collaborative learning approach as sub-groups worked through a myriad of cards each describing a different bias. Shawn said he initially used Wikipedia to start his research for the workshop.

We were set a task to categorise the biases. Along the way we reflected on our own biases - as individuals and what happens in groups.

It soon became evident as we discussed and sorted the cards that we were filtering through our own biases. It's pretty much impossible not to - biases help us process information, but they also are a hindrance when it comes to judgements and decision making. Discussions were made even more interesting by the different nationalities and cultures at each table and the additional filtering through language. In the end I felt like I was in some sort of post-modern prism or hall of mirrors.

I was reminded of this from Carlos Castaneda's Tales of Power - "We are inside a bubble. It is a bubble into which we are placed at the moment of our birth. At first the bubble is open, but then it begins to close until it has sealed us in. The bubble is our perception. We live inside that bubble all our lives. And what we witness on its round walls is our reflection. The thing reflected is our view of the world. That view is first a description which is given to us from the moment of our birth until all our attention is caught by it and the description becomes a view."

We all have biases - I do and so do you. They exist in all groups that we facilitate and that we are a part of. How do we as facilitators work to uncover, recognise, confront and mitigate for biases - our own and those that surface in groups? Can we ever burst the bubble and how do we do it responsibly? Is it irresponsible not to burst the bubble? How do we react to our own biases being challenged?

Some biases that come to mind in a recent facilitation are 'Availability Cascade' and 'Ingroup Bias'. Both were strongly at work in the group and were having a negative impact but I only really worked out what was happening after the event. What cognitive biases were at work in my mind in the moment that I missed what was happening? And if I attended to that what else might I have missed? Since Shawn's workshop I have been immersed in thinking and reading about bias - it could keep me going for a few years :-)

I'm interested in the insights and wisdom from others on cognitive biases and facilitation. Your thoughts and experiences?

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Rhonda has decades of experience as a trainer, coach and facilitator working with major corporations and organisations around the world. Her facilitation focus is usually: navigating organisational change after restructures, strategic direction setting and planning, and team development - particularly when work relationships have become dysfunctional.

