Behavioural Insights Toolkit:
A step-by-step process for building a behavioural intervention, with brainstorming cards

Research and Evaluation Unit (RIMU)
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Introduction

Behavioural insights (BI) involves the study of human behaviour, often drawing on empirical research in fields including psychology, economics and sociology. By helping to identify the behavioural factors and biases affecting people's choices, BI enables the design of more effective programmes and policies.

This toolkit has been designed by the Research and Evaluation Unit (RIMU) at Auckland Council to be useful to those wishing to improve public programmes or services, policy development, or team decision-making. It draws on a range of existing resources produced by the Behavioural Insights Team, the OECD and others (see 'other resources' on the next page).

This toolkit has two components that can be used either separately or together.

The first component is a step-by-step process for developing a behavioural intervention. It guides the user through understanding existing behaviours, identifying a desired behaviour, brainstorming ideas for promoting the desired behaviour, and robustly testing the best ideas. The user should follow the steps in the order they are numbered. It is focused on key questions to ask at each step. It is not a complete guide to *how* to answer these questions, however, and the user may need to rely on other research and evaluation resources to help with each step.

The second component of the toolkit is a series of 'brainstorming' cards. The cards cover many important behavioural principles to keep in mind when looking to improve programmes, policies, or decision-making. Each card includes a description of the behavioural principle, some examples, and suggestions for how to apply the principle. They can be used on their own or to brainstorm ideas as in the step-by-step process above. To help with navigation, the card set has been organised into a series for better services and a series for better decision-making, although there is overlap in the use of the cards. The former is marked with a red dot in the top left corner and the latter with a green dot.

How is behavioural insights relevant to government?

Behavioural insights is now used extensively across the world. Internationally, the OECD estimates there are more than 200 institutions applying behavioural insights to public policy.[1] In New Zealand, BI is recommended as a tool for policy practitioners by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC), and it is being used within a range of government departments such as the Ministry of Justice, Ministry for the Environment, Inland Revenue Department, Ministry of Social Development and Department of Conservation.

There is growing interest across the New Zealand local government sector in using BI to improve council programmes and policies. The remit of local authorities is wide and includes encouraging behaviour change across social, environmental, economic, and cultural domains.

[1] https://www.oecd.org/gov/regulatory-policy/behavioural-insights.htm

Find out more

These sets of cards were developed by Auckland Council's Research and Evaluation Unit (RIMU). For more information or to see other work in this area please visit www.knowledgeauckland.org.nz or contact us at rimu@aucklandcouncil.govt.nz.

Other RIMU BI work includes:

- *Increasing voter turnout in Auckland local government elections: results from a behavioural insights trial*[2]
- *Increasing voter turnout using behavioural insights* (literature review)[3]
- *Using behavioural insights to increase dog fine payments*[4]
- *Nudging visitors to notice Safeswim signs*[5]
- *Safeswim impact evaluation. Aucklanders' awareness and behaviour one year on*[6]

Other resources

The following public resources are recommended:

- EAST: Four Simple Ways to Apply Behavioural Insights (https://www.bi.team/publications/east-four-simple-ways-to-apply-behavioural-insights/)
- MINDSPACE: Influencing behaviour through public policy (https://www.bi.team/publications/mindspace/)
- Tools and Ethics for Applied Behavioural Insights: The BASIC Toolkit (https://www.oecd.org/gov/regulatory-policy/tools-and-ethics-for-applied-behavioural-insights-the-basic-toolkit-9ea76a8f-en.htm)
- Test, Learn, Adapt: Developing Public Policy with Randomised Controlled Trials (https://www.bi.team/publications/test-learn-adapt-developing-public-policy-with-randomised-controlled-trials/)

[2] https://knowledgeauckland.org.nz/publications/increasing-voter-turnout-in-auckland-local-government-elections-results-from-a-behavioural-insights-trial

[3] https://knowledgeauckland.org.nz/publications/increasing-voter-turnout-using-behavioural-insights/

[4] https://knowledgeauckland.org.nz/publications/using-behavioural-insights-to-increase-dog-fine-payments/

[5] https://knowledgeauckland.org.nz/publications/nudging-visitors-to-notice-safeswim-signs/

[6] https://knowledgeauckland.org.nz/publications/safeswim-impact-evaluation-aucklanders-awareness-and-behaviour-one-year-on/

Table of contents

Step-by-step process for building a behavioural intervention

1 OVERALL PROJECT GOAL:

Describe the project's overall goal or challenge using a 'how might we' statement.

How might we _____

for _____

so that _____

PROJECT NAME

_____

2 CURRENT BEHAVIOUR

*Define what the **current behaviour** is that we are seeing. Get really specific by asking the following questions:*

- ***Who** is performing the behaviour?*
- ***What** is the current behaviour we are observing?*
- *What is the physical and social **context** in which the behaviour is occurring?*
- *What **key decisions** are being made in the lead up to the current behaviour?*
- ***Why** is the current behaviour occurring?*
- *What is the **outcome** of the behaviour?*
- ***How** can we reach the people performing the behaviour?*

Summary:

Using the answers to the questions above, summarise the current behaviour in the following format:

Who's performing the behaviour
+
What they are doing
+
When/where/how they are doing it
+
What the outcome is

E.g.
During fortnightly team meetings
+
Team members regularly check their email
+
using their phones
+
and miss important aspects of the meeting, resulting in other members of the team feeling disrespected. (They also satisfy their need/desire to regularly check for incoming mail)

4 BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS PRINCIPLES

***Identify possible BI principles** that might be contributing to the current behaviour or could be used to **nudge** users towards the desired behaviour. Use the RIMU behavioural insights brainstorming cards or EAST framework to brainstorm ideas.*

5 DEVELOP NEW IDEAS

*Brainstorm **improvements to your existing product or service** that combat the barriers you have identified and help nudge users towards the desired behaviour.*

3 DESIRED BEHAVIOUR

*Define what the **desired behaviour** is we want to see. Get really specific by asking if we were to train a camera at the desired outcome:*

- *What would it **see**?*
- *What would it **hear**?*
- *What **thoughts and emotions** would it record (it's a special camera that can read minds)?*

*Describe the **specific outcomes** that will arise as a result of this new behaviour:*

Summary:

Using the desired behaviour and expected outcomes above, summarise the behaviour in a sentence capturing the following info:

Who's performing the behaviour
+
What they are now doing
+
When/where/how they are doing it
+
What the outcome is

E.g.
Team members who attend fortnightly team meetings
+
turn their phones off
+
at the start of the meeting, before the opening karakia
+
so that everyone's attention is focused on the meeting and everyone feels listened to

6 TEST, LEARN, ADAPT

Select a small number of ideas and develop a trial to **test** what works. Use a randomised controlled trial (RCT) or similar where possible.

Learn what works, then **adapt** it to further improve.

Scale up the most successful intervention.

Behavioural Insights for better services

Reduce Friction

Description

Our brains are limited in the amount of information they can process at the same time. This is often referred to as 'mental bandwidth'. We are also wired to follow the path of least resistance – to prefer actions that require low effort.

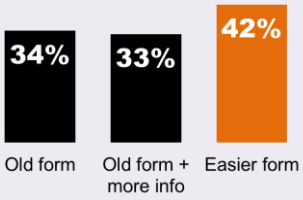
If we don't have the required mental capacity to think about a task (due to being busy and/or stressed), or if the task is perceived as being difficult, we are likely to delay or avoid doing it.

The amount of effort or 'friction' associated with doing something therefore matters a great deal. All else being equal, people are much more likely to complete a task when it is easy to do.

Examples

Increasing university enrolment and attendance

Students from low-income households were more likely to apply for university (and still be there one year later) when the university application forms were made easier to fill out. Just providing more information had no effect on enrolment rates.[1]



Increasing tax payment

People were 18% more likely to pay their taxes when sent a letter with a URL direct to the form, rather than the same letter with the URL to a page containing the form.[2]

How to use

- Make the desired behaviour as easy to do as possible.
- Consider how to make undesirable behaviours harder to do.
- Common ways of reducing friction include:
    - Reducing the number of steps in a process
    - Simplifying tasks
    - Pre-selecting options
    - Auto-populating forms
    - Grouping similar information or tasks together to increase ease of processing and understanding
    - Reducing the number of choices offered
    - Simplifying messages.
- Test your messages, forms or processes for simplicity before rolling them out.

Related BI principles

- Choice overload
- Setting the right default
- Simplify messages

References

[1] https://www.bi.team/publications/east-four-simple-ways-to-apply-behavioural-insights/
[2] Ibid.

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Simplify Messages

Description

People are more likely to read, pay attention to, and act on information they can easily understand.

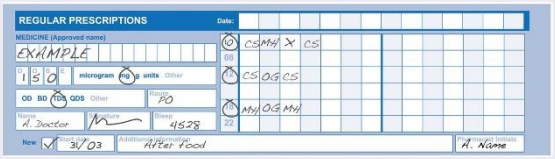
In fact, how easy something is to read – known as its processing fluency – is so important that simple messages are rated by readers as more persuasive and their authors more intelligent.[1]

Conversely, messages that are dense and difficult to process are less likely to be read, understood and acted upon. Often such messages are ignored entirely.

Examples

Increasing fine payment
Simplifying Auckland Council dog infringement letters increased fine payment rates by 69%, resulting in increased fine collections of approximately $90,000 per year.[2]

Reducing prescription errors
Simplifying UK hospital prescription charts and providing pre-populated tick boxes reduced prescribing errors and increased the accuracy of doctor-provided information.[3]



How to use

- Use simple, non-technical language.
- Be specific about recommended actions.
- Make the desired behaviour easy by breaking it down into simple steps.
- Make sure that the key message is presented early, ideally in the first sentence or subject line.
- Highlight key information using colour, headings, call-out boxes, and **bold text**.
- Highlight the consequences of not doing the desired behaviour.
- Use rhyming statements to help people remember to act – such statements are easier to process (i.e. they have higher processing fluency) and are rated as more believable and likeable.

Related BI principles

- Reduce friction
- Reduce choice overload
- Attract attention

References

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[2] Allpress, J. A. (2019). Using behavioural insights to increase dog fine payments, Auckland Council.

[3] King D., Jabbar, A., Charani, E., et al . (2014) Redesigning the 'choice architecture' of hospital prescription charts: a mixed methods study incorporating in situ simulation testing, *BMJ Open.*

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Set the Right 'Default'

Description

People often prefer to go with the flow, exerting the least amount of effort possible.

As a result, the 'default' – the choice that is pre-selected – can have a big impact on behaviour. Not only does it provide a low effort option by implicitly suggesting the 'preferred' choice, it determines the outcome if a person does not actively choose any of the other options presented to them.

An example is Kiwisaver, where new employees are automatically enrolled into the savings scheme, with the ability to opt-out.

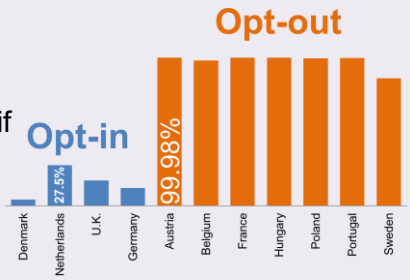
Examples

Customer survey subscriptions

Customers were more likely to agree to receive future health survey invitations when the survey question default was pre-set to 'yes' (89%) or when a forced choice was required (89%), than when it was pre-set to 'no' (60%).[1]

Organ donation

The rates of organ donation are much higher in countries where residents are automatically enrolled but can 'opt-out' if they want (>90%) than those with systems where individuals have to manually 'opt-in' to become a donor (<15%).[2]



How to use

- Map out what happens at each step in your customer's journey where a choice is made.
- Consider whether a default can be set at each of these steps to increase the likelihood of beneficial outcome(s) for users and society.
- Ensure defaults are transparent and do not restrict the ability of people to make a choice.
- Where a default may result in significant impacts on users, or is likely to be controversial, it is necessary to collect evidence of public support for the default (e.g. via a public opinion survey) before making changes.

Related BI principles

- Reduce choice overload
- Reduce friction

References

[1] Davidai, S., Gilovich, T., & Ross, L. (2012). The meaning of default options for potential organ donors. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 109(38),* 15201-5.

[2] Johnson, E. J., Bellman, S., and Lohse, G. L. 2002. Defaults, framing and privacy: Why opting in ≠ opting out. *Marketing Letters, 13(1),* 5-15.

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Reduce Choice Overload

Description

Choice is good, but too many choices can be paralysing. Having too many options is mentally taxing and can result in 'choice overload'.

Research shows that too many choices can lead to people being indecisive, unhappy, and even refraining from making the choice at all.

Choice overload is greatest when the decision task is difficult, when the choice set is complex, when people are uncertain about their preferences, and when people prefer to minimise their effort.[1]

Examples

Retirement savings
Offering a larger number of retirement fund options reduced savings rates among low-knowledge investors. This effect was reduced when funds were grouped to make choosing easier.[2]

Purchasing decisions
Shoppers were 10 times more likely to purchase gourmet jams and chocolates when faced with 6 choices rather than an extensive array of 24 or 30 choices. They were also more likely to be happy with their decision when faced with a smaller number of choices.[3]

How to use

- Document how many choices you are offering people.
- Identify potential choice overload - do one or more of the following apply?
    - There are many choices
    - The decision task is difficult
    - The choice set is complex
    - Users are likely to be uncertain about their preferences
    - Users are likely to prefer to minimise their effort.
- Reduce choice overload by:
    - Reducing the number of choices offered
    - Group similar choices together to make navigation and shortlisting easier
    - Provide recommendations or ratings of the different choices.

Related BI principles

- Setting the right 'default'
- Reduce friction

References

[1] Chernev, A., Böckenholt, U. & Goodman, J. (2015) Choice overload: A conceptual review and meta-analysis, *Journal of Consumer Psychology, 25(2),* 333-358.

[2] Morrin, M., Broniarczyk, S., & Inman, J. (2012). Plan format and participation in 401(K) plans: The moderating role of investor knowledge. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing, 31,* 254-268.

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Attract Attention

Description

Every day we are faced with many things vying for our attention. Although our brains have evolved to process information efficiently, there are limits to how much they can process at the same time, and we cannot pay attention to everything around us.

Unless a message is designed to grab people's attention, it risks being missed or ignored completely. Eye tracking studies, for example, show that even when people are asked to read something, they often only skim content and pay attention to headings and images.[1]

If our main messages aren't connected to those attention-grabbing elements they risk not being seen at all.

Eye tracking 'heat map'

Examples

Getting people to notice public health signs on beaches

Auckland's Safeswim programme made use of colourful footsteps stuck to the footpath to increase engagement with digital water quality signs. The low-cost intervention increased in-depth engagement by 769%.[2]

Duolingo notification dot

Doulingo, a popular mobile language learning app, found that adding a notification dot to their app's home screen icon when something new was inside the app, encouraged users to open the app and increased the number of daily active users by 7.6%.[3] Use of such notification dots is now common.

How to use

- Include your main message and call to action (what you want people to do) upfront, ideally as the first thing people see.
- Use colour, font size, images and layout to draw attention to the most important messages.
- Personalise your content, by using people's names and referencing things that are important to them as much as possible.
- Tailor your approach to the environment. 'Loud' environments – where lots of other things are competing for peoples attention – might require a more attention-grabbing design than 'quiet' environments where people are not overloaded with competing stimuli.

  Consider the environment in which people will receive your message and design in a way that is contextually appropriate.

Related BI principles

- Reduce friction
- Simplify messages

References

[1] Behavioural Insights Team (2012). Applying behavioural insights to reduce fraud, error, and debt. Retrieved from https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fraud-error-and-debt-behavioural-insights-team-paper.

[2] Allpress, J. A. (2019). 'Nudging' visitors to notice Safeswim Signs. Auckland Council. http://knowledgeauckland.org.nz/assets/publications/Nudging-visitors-to-notice-Safeswim-signs-summary-Dec-2018.pdf

[3] https://firstround.com/review/the-tenets-of-a-b-testing-from-duolingos-master-growth-hacker/

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Scarcity

Description

People desire items more when there are fewer available. When something is less readily available (e.g. due to limited quantity or time), we tend to perceive it as more valuable.

Scarcity is used frequently in marketing to increase sales. Marketing messages with limited quantity appeals are thought to be more effective than limited time appeals, because they create a sense of competition among consumers.[1]

It can also be used to increase the uptake of government and other services, by highlighting the limited availability of those services.

Examples

Absence makes the heart grow fonder
University students who tended to be dissatisfied with the quality of their cafeteria food rated it higher after they found out the cafeteria had suffered a fire and would not be open for several weeks.[2]

Scarcity sells
People exposed to wristwatch ads stating “Exclusive limited edition. Hurry, limited stocks” were willing to pay 50% more for the watch than those shown an ad stating “New edition. Many items in stock”.[3]

How to use

- Highlight the limited availability of a service or product (in terms of quantity or duration) to increase its attractiveness and take up.
- Establish deadlines for action to motivate those who might be lower in motivation.
- The effect of scarcity is strongest when:
    - Quantity is low
    - People have observed the quantity decreasing (i.e. when moving from ample availability to scarcity)
    - Other people are competing for the item (i.e. demand is high).

Related BI principles

- Social norms
- Loss aversion

References

[1] Aggarwal, P., Jun, S. Y., & Huh, J. H. (2011). Scarcity messages. *Journal of Advertising, 40*(3), 19-30.

[2] Rose, C. (2010). *How to win campaigns: Communications for Change*. Eartchscan, London.

[3] Lee, S. Y., & Seidle, R. (2012). Narcissists as consumers: The effects of perceived scarcity on processing of product information. *Social Behavior and Personality, 40(9),* 1485-1500.

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Commitments

Description

People want to follow through on their intentions, and tend to feel bad when they don't.

Eliciting a commitment from someone is one of the best ways to encourage them to act in accordance with their intentions. When people actively commit to doing something it strengthens their resolve to follow through.

Research shows that commitments have a strong effect on people's behaviour and are most effective when they are written and when the commitment is made public.[1]

Examples

Putting ourselves in harms way

95% of people who agreed to watch a stranger's belongings intervened to stop a thief, compared to only 20% of passive bystanders.[1]

Asking visitors to promise to do no harm to the environment

Threatened by negative impacts of tourism, the archipelago of Palau now requires every visitor to sign the Palau Pledge in their passport as a condition of entry into the country, vowing to leave no waste and to do no harm to the island.[2] An impact evaluation hasn't yet been completed.

How to use

- Increase the number of people who follow through and perform a desired action by getting them to make a commitment.
- Verbal commitments are good.
- Written commitments are better.
- Making the commitment public strengthens its effect.
- Using prompts to remind people of their commitment may help prolong its effects.

Related BI principles

- Consistency
- Make a plan
- Reciprocity
- Start small to build momentum

References

[1] Moriarty, T. (1975) Crime, commitment, and the responsive bystander: Two field experiments. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 31,* 370-376.

[2] https://palaupledge.com/

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Messenger Effect

Description

The messenger matters. That is, the person who delivers a message has an important impact on whether people pay attention it.

We are particularly influenced by people who are similar to us in terms of demographic characteristics and interests, by people we like, and by people with authority (e.g. experts and those with high standing).

Examples

We are more likely to vote after talking to someone similar to us

Researchers organised Latino canvassers to mobilise low-turnout Latino communities in the USA. The canvassing increased turnout amongst Latino voters from 13.8% to 18.5%. The impact on non-Latino voters was also positive, but lower, demonstrating the importance of having messengers to whom voters can relate and connect.[1]

Encouraging weightlifters to reduce meat consumption

Athletes and weightlifters tend to value meat consumption, and may be resistant to traditional arguments for adopting a plant-based diet. A recent documentary – The Game Changers – uses high level athletes and bodybuilders as messengers to convince this resistant audience of the benefits and viability of a plant-based diet.[2]

How to use

- Choose a messenger that is most likely to influence your target group.

- Consider selecting messengers that have some combination of the following characteristics:
    - are demographically similar to the audience
    - share an important group membership with the audience
    - are respected (e.g. kaumatua)
    - occupy a central role in the group
    - are nominated by others as someone who is good at sharing information
    - are well known or famous
    - are experts or authorities
    - are able to deliver their message in person for maximum impact.

Related BI principles

- Descriptive social norms
- Liking
- Authority

References

[1] Michelson, M.R. (2003) Getting out the Latino vote: how door-to-door canvassing influences voter turnout in rural central California. *Political Behaviour, 25,* 247-263.

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Start Small to Build Momentum

Description

People want to act consistently with their past actions, and tend to feel bad when they don't. Past actions are also often used as a mental shortcut for whether or not to do something new, and research shows that people are more likely to agree to do something new if it is consistent with their past behaviour. This can be useful to keep in mind when helping people develop new habits.

Encouraging small, easy actions first can lead people to perform a bigger, harder actions later. Having already done the small action, people are more likely to respond positively to larger requests, as they are now 'the sort of person' to do such things.

For example, petitions are often used by advocacy groups not just as a tool to influence government, but as a way to increase future action amongst those who sign the petition.

#SignthePledge

Examples

'Foot-in-the-door' technique

Researchers increased the proportion of residents agreeing to the installation of a large driver safety billboard in their yard from 17% to 76%. How? By asking them a week earlier to put a small, amateurish-looking "Be a safe driver" card in their window or car.[1] The researchers coined this the 'foot-in-the-door' technique.

Reducing drink driving

A random group of regular bar patrons were asked to sign an anti-drink-driving petition. Compared to patrons who weren't asked, the group was significantly more likely to take a taxi home when observed to be intoxicated in the bar over the subsequent six-week period.[2]

How to use

- Start by asking people to make a small, easy change in behaviour.
- Purposefully and systematically build on the small initial change by encouraging larger, more impactful changes.
- Try to ensure the initial request is as similar to subsequent requests as possible.
- Use that initial act to encourage people to see themselves as the 'sort of people' who care about the underlying issue being addressed by the behaviour.
- Ensure there is an adequate delay between the initial and subsequent requests (as research shows the effect is stronger when there is a delay of days or weeks between the first and subsequent requests).[3]

Related BI principles

- Consistency
- Commitments
- Defaults
- Make a plan

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Descriptive Social Norms

Description

We look to the behaviour of others to guide our behaviour.

Descriptive social norms refer to the actual behaviour of others. Contrary to the desire to be unique, when we see or hear about a large number of people doing something, we are more likely to do it ourselves.

Highlighting what the majority of people are doing, in the form of a social norm message (e.g. “8 out of 10 people…”), has a reliable impact on people’s behaviour – especially when those performing the behaviour share demographic or other characteristics with the recipient of the message.

Check how this differs from ‘trending social norms’

Examples

Tax payments

Including a social norm message describing the percentage of people who pay their tax on time in late payment reminder letters (“The great majority of people in your local area pay their tax on time. Most people with a debt like yours have paid it by now.”) increased payment rates by 15% (from 33.6% to 38.6%).[1]

Energy conservation

Informing residents that they use more energy than their neighbours results in reductions in energy use.[2]

Encouraging product purchases

Restaurant diners were 20% more likely to choose a dessert when it was labelled “Most Popular!”.[3]

How to use

Consider whether the behaviour you are trying to encourage is performed by the majority of people

- Where possible, collect stats on how many people are performing the behaviour, and tell people about it (e.g. “X% of people…”, “X out of 10 people…”, “The great majority of people…”).
- Present the stats as specific, personalised, and localised as possible (e.g. in the local area, in the recipient’s group or club)
- **Caution 1:** Avoid highlighting a negative social norm (i.e. when not many people are doing the desired behaviour, or lots of people are doing something undesirable) as it is likely to encourage undesirable behaviour.
- **Caution 2:** People who are already doing better than the norm (e.g. recycling more, using less energy) are at risk of being drawn *down* to the norm, and reducing their desirable behaviour. Use messages of encouragement and approval (e.g. ☺ feedback) to prevent this from happening.

Related BI principles

- Trending social norms
- Messenger effect
- Scarcity

References

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Trending Social Norms

Description

We look to the behaviour of others to guide our behaviour.

Trending social norms refer to a behaviour that is on the rise and may become a future descriptive social norm (see the other card on this topic!). Often a desired behaviour may still be relatively uncommon overall but is becoming more common. A trending norm reflects the start of a social movement, the wave of influence that spreads through a group as people adopt a new behaviour. Highlighting the fact that others are adopting the behaviour increases the likelihood of people joining the movement.

Check how this differs from 'descriptive social norms'

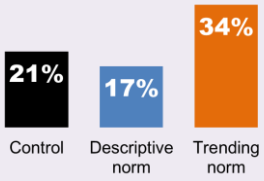
Examples

Decreasing water usage

Students exposed to a trending pro-environmental norm (i.e. info about how the percentage of university students engaging in water saving behaviour is increaseing) subsequently used less water when brushing their teeth.[1]

Reducing meat consumption

People were more likely to order meat-free cafeteria lunches when exposed to information about how 30% of Americans have recently started changing their behaviour to reduce meat consumption (trending norm), than when told that 30% of American's routinely make an effort to limit meat consumption (descriptive norm), or no information at all (the control).[2]



How to use

- If the number of people performing a desired behaviour is increasing – even if it is still only a minority of people – highlight this change to encourage others to join in.
- Describe the change in the desired behaviour over recent times, using truthful statistics. Invite people to join in.
- Examples of trending norm wording used in studies include:

> *"More and more customers are switching from to-go-cups to a sustainable alternative. Be part of this movement and choose a reusable mug."*
>
> *"Some people are starting to limit how much meat they eat. This is true both nationally and here at Stanford. Specifically, recent research has shown that, over the last 5 years, 30% of Americans have started to make an effort to limit their meat consumption. That means that, in recent years, 3 in 10 people have changed their behaviour and begun to eat less meat than they otherwise would."*[3]

Related BI principles

- Descriptive social norms
- Messenger effect
- Scarcity

References

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Behavioural Insights for better services

Timely Prompts

Description

We're all busy and it can be hard to remember to do everything we need to do, let alone everything we want to do.

Timely prompts can be extremely useful for helping people remember to do the things they want to do, at the time that they need to do it.

Prompts can come in many forms: they can be visual, auditory, tactile, physical. Prompts can be delivered in relation to physical locations, tasks, or times.

Examples

Text reminders to vote

The NZ Electoral Commission trialled sending text reminders to a random selection of potential voters on General Election day, 2008. The message resulted in a 6.6% increase in turnout compared to those who didn't receive the message (75.5% and 70.8%, respectively).[1]

A timely ask can triple charitable giving

A trial was run to determine whether a timely prompt about charitable giving when people were preparing a will would impact on how much money they left to charity. Simply asking whether they wished to leave any money to charity doubled the number of people who chose to donate (from 5% to 10%). Asking whether they wished to donate to a personal passion tripled the number (to 15%).[2]

How to use

- Consider when the best time would be to prompt someone to perform the desired behaviour.
- Consider *how* the prompt should be delivered (e.g. text message, email, phone call, physical sign).
- Consider what time the prompt should be delivered (e.g. time of day, day of week).
- If the behaviour has a 'critical window' (i.e. it has to be completed at a certain time of day or at a precise location) then the prompt should be delivered as close as possible in terms of physical location and time to where/when the behaviour needs to be performed.
- If there is a risk that recipients will get used to the prompt and start ignoring it over time, consider periodically changing how and when the prompt is delivered.

Related BI principles

- Major life events
- Fresh start effect
- Attract attention

References

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Major Life Events

Description

The timing of an intervention matters. Research shows that people are more open to changing their habits during major life events, such as moving to a new house, changing jobs, and having children.[1]

Such events reflect 'critical periods' for behaviour change, and interventions that are timed to coincide with periods of greater openness to habit change are more likely to be effective. Research shows the duration of the 'window of opportunity' is likely about three months after the major life event.

Examples

Moving house and pro-environmental behaviour

A large-scale experiment showed that people who had just moved house were much more likely to change their behaviour in response to an intervention promoting sustainable behaviour than both households that moved but didn't receive the intervention and those who didn't move.[2]

Moving house is a time to encourage new travel behaviour

There is evidence that when people move to a new house they are much more open to changing their transport behaviour.[3] Researchers tracked people who had recently moved house and sent a random selection of people a free public transport ticket and personalised schedule information to encourage public transport use. Those who received the ticket and info significantly increased their public transport use and decreased their driving; those who didn't receive anything continued with their old habits.

How to use

- Consider whether there are any life events that present a natural 'window of opportunity' for changing behaviour. People are more likely to be open to new ways of doing things when their normal habits are disrupted by the life event.
- Time your interventions to coincide with these windows of opportunity.
- Be aware that the opportunity to influence people after their habits have been disrupted does not last forever. Research suggests (for moving house, at least) that the duration of the window of opportunity is likely about three months after the major life event.
- Remember to act sensitively and appropriately in relation to the nature of the life event. For example, an intervention that is appropriate after someone moves house may not be appropriate after someone loses a loved one.

Related BI principles

- Timely prompts
- Attract attention
- Set the right 'default'

References

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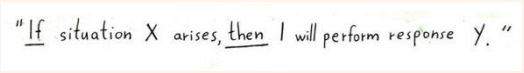
Make a Plan

Description

People commonly have intentions to change their behaviour (e.g. eat healthier) but do not end up taking action – a phenomenon known in psychology as the 'intention-behaviour gap'. This is because behaviour is influenced by more than just our good intentions: things like our emotions and the environment around us can lead us astray.

Luckily, helping people make a plan can significantly increase their ability to follow through. Identifying potential obstacles and developing an "if-then plan" can lead to better goal attainment and habit formation.



Examples

Increasing pro-environmental behaviours
People who made a plan were more likely than those who didn't to use a new bus route and shop at a bio-store.[1]

Increasing physical activity
A short plan-making intervention significantly increased physical activity amongst those with chronic back pain, compared to a control group who didn't receive the intervention.[2]

Increasing academic performance
Students who were randomly assigned to a group that developed a study plan exerted 60% more effort in preparing for an important test than those who were assigned to a group that wasn't encouraged to make a plan.[3]

How to use

- Help people make a specific, written plan to follow through on their intentions

- WOOP My Life (www.woopmylife.org) is an excellent tool for developing an effective plan. It combines plan making with a technique called 'mental contrasting' (basically, visualising one's goals as well as the obstacles to achieving those goals).

- WOOP stands for Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, Plan, and you use it by working through the following:
    1. What is your **wish**?
    2. What would be the best **outcome** if you fulfilled your wish?
    3. What is your main inner **obstacle** that holds you back from fulfilling your wish?
    4. Make a **plan** to overcome your obstacle. Develop a plan using the following format "if… (obstacle), then I will … (action or thought)." Try to be as specific as possible.

Related BI principles

- Commitments
- Consistency

References

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[2] Duckworth, A. L., Grant, H., Loew, B., Oettingen, G., & Gollwitzer, P. (2011). Self-regulation strategies improve self-discipline in adolescents: Benefits of mental contrasting and implementation intention. *Educational Psychology, 31(1),* 17-26.

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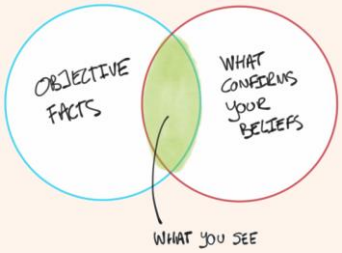
Behavioural Insights for better decision-making

Confirmation Bias

Description

People generally like to be right. When the world conforms to our expectations, we feel competent and in control. The trouble begins, however, when our preference for being right interferes with our ability to adjust our beliefs in response to new facts and information.

Confirmation bias[1] is our tendency to subconsciously seek out evidence that confirms our existing beliefs and attitudes and to ignore, misinterpret or reject evidence that opposes them. This bias results in people being less open to new facts and can lead to poorer decisions.



Examples

Polarisation of attitudes

Research shows that when two people with opposing views on an issue consider a piece of information that contains some support for both views, they each interpret it as being supportive only of their current belief and become *even more convinced* that their own view is the correct one.[2] This effect is strongest for value-driven, emotionally charged issues, e.g. welfare, gun control, law and order.

Social media

Social media, such as Facebook and Instagram, is notorious for using algorithms to show users information that is likely to be in line with their preferences and beliefs. However, even without clever machine code, most people would create their personalised ‘echo chambers’ by surrounding themselves with like-minded voices and shutting out opposing views.

What can you do about it?

Forewarned is forearmed

Recognising that you may be subject to this bias is your first line of defence. It will help you step outside your comfort zone and seek out information that is inconsistent with your existing opinions.

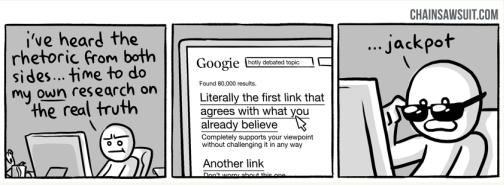


Image by Kris Straub

Find a likeable 'devil's advocate'

Ask somebody you like and respect to play devil's advocate by poking holes in your reasoning and asking tough questions. Make a point not to argue your side; instead, record the issues they raise and try to understand their reasoning.

Be comfortable with being uncomfortable

When you are dealing with something important or emotionally charged, it is not easy to give fair consideration to the side you don't agree with. It requires a certain mental fortitude and determination. If you are not at least a little bit uncomfortable, you are not doing it right.

Related BI principles

- Groupthink
- IKEA effect

References

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Behavioural Insights for better decision-making

Anchoring Bias

Description

The human brain has a tendency to give too much weight to the first piece of information that it encounters on an unfamiliar topic. It is natural that people need a starting point for their reasoning; however, this becomes problematic when the first piece of information influences our subsequent thinking too much.

Anchoring bias occurs when the first piece of information becomes an 'anchor' for subsequent reasoning, estimates and decision-making.[1] This bias is surprisingly strong and widespread. Even seemingly irrelevant information can have an effect.

Examples

Estimating Voter Turnout

What was the voter turnout in 2019 local government elections in Nelson City? Was it less or more than 30.2%? If you don't know the answer off the top of you head, chances are your estimate would be unduly influenced by the implicitly suggested 30% mark. Find out the correct answer by looking at the back of the card.[2]

Salary negotiations

During salary negotiations, the party that offers the first dollar figure anchors the subsequent conversation.[3] Contrary to popular belief that negotiators must play their cards close to their chest and get the other party to reveal their preferences first, it can, in some instances, be a shrewd tactic to lay your (cheekily high) cards down first.

What can you do about it?

Watch out for anchors

Anchors are not always as easy to spot as the first offer in a salary negotiation. Watch out for other things that can anchor your reasoning: casually expressed ideas from others, your own first reflections, and data that may not be reliable or even relevant.

Avoid anchoring others

If you are seeking advice and guidance from others, do not give them your thoughts first, let them come up with their own estimates. Similarly, in a group discussion, get people to write their initial thoughts down before sharing.

Defuse the anchor

When you are presented with an anchoring estimate that you do not find reasonable, make sure to defuse the anchor by clearly stating your impressions of it or further investigating its basis. Then try to approach the situation anew and provide an independent estimate.

Related BI principles

- Focusing illusion
- Availability bias

References

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Loss Aversion

Description

What would affect your mood more: finding $1,000 or losing $1,000?

Even though the value of the two options is the same, you would probably be more upset about losing your own money than you would be happy about finding someone else's.

Loss aversion[1] is people's tendency to place more importance on losses than on the equivalent gains. It applies widely: to money, possessions, power and status. Research suggests that we feel losses about twice as strongly as equivalent gains.

One explanation for loss aversion is that we are evolutionarily wired to pay more attention to losses and negative information. Research shows that bad everyday events have stronger effects than good events on a wide variety of wellbeing measures.

Examples

Risky shift in government decision-making

How a problem is framed can have a strong impact on the type of decisions politicians and civil servants end up making. Both groups are more likely to choose a risky policy option when it is presented in terms of the loss it might prevent, rather than the benefits it might accrue (e.g. framing a policy in terms of how many deaths it might prevent vs how many lives it might save, even when the numerical loss of life is the same).[2]

Framing decisions to motivate action

In one study, researchers looked at how framing affected women's intentions to perform breast self-exams to test for early signs of cancer.[3] Women received an information brochure that stressed either (i) the benefits of performing the self-exam, or (ii) the losses that may result from inaction. Can you guess which brochure was more persuasive?

What can you do about it?

Relax

Try to relax next time you are concentrating too much on one piece of negative feedback amid a stream of positive ones.

Scale things down

People's tendency to give more weight to losses than the equivalent gains gets stronger as the size of the losses and gains increases.[4] One way to mitigate the potential effect of loss aversion on decision making is to scale the discussion down to a smaller number, for example by converting losses and gains to percentages (thus scaling to 100).

Contextualise

The perceived magnitude of losses and gains is influenced by the context. One way to avoid potential losses having a disproportionate effect on decisions is to discuss those losses in the broader context.[4] This broader context often gives decisionmakers perspective.

Use losses to motivate action

Consider framing information in terms of potential losses rather than gains as a way to motivate action.

Related BI principles

- Sunk costs
- Anchoring

References

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Behavioural Insights for better decision-making

Groupthink

Description

Generally speaking, people like to get along with others. To achieve this, most of us habitually monitor our behaviour to ensure it is aligned with social rules and expectations. This usually works well, and it helps create environments that are productive and emotionally safe for both work and play.

The trouble begins, however, when a person's desire to get along overshadows their ability to reason rationally and challenge the thinking of others in their group.

Groupthink is a form of dysfunctional group decision-making characterised by self-censorship and pressure to conform**.** It often results in sub-optimal or irrational decisions.

Examples

Many an organisational decision-making process has been derailed due to the inability or unwillingness of group members to openly disagree with each other and with their leadership.

There are plenty of historic examples of teams within governments being reluctant to voice concerns and – against better judgment – supporting their leaders' questionable policies.[1] One such instance was in 1938 when the British Prime Minister kept yielding to Hitler's demands in an effort to appease him. Though this policy was heavily criticized by the public, the PM's cabinet did not openly question the course of action.

Groupthink is most prevalent in situations where a decision-making group is highly homogeneous and cohesive, when it faces an external threat and when members are prone to overestimating the group's power and morality.

What can you do about it?

Assemble a diverse group

Groupthink is most pronounced among homogeneous groups. Getting together a group that is diverse in perspectives and demographics and is comfortable sharing honest opinions can add substantial value to the robustness of the discussion.

Be a quiet leader (or Be quiet, leader!)

Group leaders should recognise that once they state their opinion, it can be psychologically difficult for group members to offer opposing viewpoints. Leaders may be wise to withhold their views until after others have had a chance to express theirs.

Set group norms

Groupthink can be counteracted by setting the meeting rules for members to voice all relevant considerations, no matter how inconvenient.

Make sharing anonymous

For particularly difficult decisions or contentious topics, it may be wise to solicit opinions in an anonymous way. This can easily be done online, and could take place before, during and even after the sessions.

Use collaborative 'red teaming'[2]

Important projects may benefit from assembling a 'red team' – a group whose sole purpose is to find weakness in the project, so they can be addressed proactively.

Related BI principles

- Confirmation bias
- Captainitis

References

1. Janis, I. L. (1982). *Groupthink: psychological studies of policy decisions and fiascoes*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
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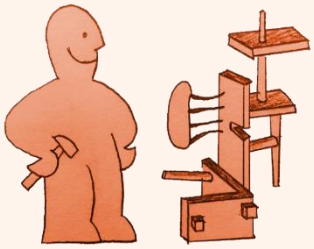
Behavioural Insights for better decision-making

IKEA Effect

Description

IKEA is the largest furniture retailer in the world. Its success is stunning given that the company off-loads a lot of labour to its customers, who need to assemble the products themselves. The resulting low prices are of course an important part of IKEA's success story, but there is also a deeper psychological reason for the company's success.



Dubbed the IKEA effect, the reason is that we like things more when we have made them ourselves.[1]

Examples

When labour leads to love

Non-profit organisations often have admirable goals and a passionate, dedicated workforce. But when people devote a lot of effort and time to any project, they can fall victim to the IKEA effect ("I have worked so hard on this project, it must be great!") and their assessment of the value of their work can become clouded. The only way to be objective in this case is to use data to monitor and evaluate the work.

IKEA creations

Participants were asked to either make an IKEA box or inspect one that was pre-built.[2] When given a chance to bid on these items later, those who assembled the box themselves bid more on it (and liked the box more) than those who just inspected the box. In a similar experiment with origami, participants who made origami themselves (compared to those who just looked at the pre-made origami) thought other people would pay more for their relatively-unskilled creations.

What can you do about it?

Involve your stakeholders
If your project requires buy-in from stakeholders who do not have to participate in design or planning, find a way to involve them anyway. This is not just good practice: if stakeholders contribute to shaping the final product, they are more likely to like and support it.

Guard against the sunk cost fallacy
It is common knowledge that we need to assess the value of projects on their potential future performance rather than on the time or money we have already invested. However, this 'sunk cost fallacy' is sometimes difficult to avoid, and now you know why that it is – if we spend time and effort creating something, we tend to overvalue it. When evaluating potential projects, it may be good practice to disregard the investment you have already made and cannot recover.

Related BI principles

- Confirmation bias
- Sunk costs

References

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Behavioural Insights for better decision-making

Focusing Illusion

Description

Who do you think is happier – Americans living in the cold Midwest or in sunny California? If your intuition tells you that Californians must be happier, you wouldn't be alone. That is, you wouldn't be alone in being wrong.

In one study, Midwesterners and Californians both thought that Californians would be happier, when in fact both groups reported the same levels of life satisfaction.[1] People focused too much on the obvious differences in climate in making decisions about others' happiness.

The focusing illusion is our tendency to focus on the one or two obvious differences between choices, and to ignore, or underestimate, the less visible but potentially more important factors.

Examples

The focusing illusion leads to driving over taking the bus

The choice to commute by car is influenced primarily by a prediction of how it feels to drive a car, compared to other modes. This comparison is overly influenced by the most obvious features of the car and bus itself (looks, seats etc.), rather than the nature of the journey. This leads people to predict they will enjoy car commuting more than bus commuting, but when people are surveyed during their commute in their car at the lights, or on the bus, those riding the bus were *more* positive than car drivers.[2]

Harvard happiness

Harvard University has a range of dormitories and students often hope to get into one of 'the best' dorms, predicting that they will be happier if they do. In reality, research shows that students in the most desirable dormitories are no happier than students in other dormitories.[3]

What can you do about it?

Focus on objectives
The focusing illusion is usually a problem when people think of decisions in terms of alternative courses of action: i.e. we can either choose A *or* B. As a result, prominent differences between the options come to the foreground and dominate thinking.

Instead, try focusing on your objectives – what do you want to achieve? The trick here is not only to specify what you want (e.g. happiness), but also to break it down into what that means in your particular decision context (e.g. quality of personal relationships, access to recreation, etc.).

If students in the Harvard study had thought more about what kinds of things actually contributed to their happiness, they may have foreseen that the architectural sophistication of their dorm was far from the most important factor.

Related BI principles

- Anchoring bias
- Availability bias

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Sunk Costs

Description

Imagine that you have bought an expensive ticket to attend a talk by an author you like. Early on in the show, however, you realise that the guy is not a great speaker and you are getting very bored. Luckily, you are sitting right next to an exit and can sneak out without anyone noticing. Would you do it?

If you felt obliged to endure the rest of the talk because you had already paid for the ticket, you would be falling for the sunk cost fallacy. Rationally, the costs that we have already incurred (and cannot recover) should not affect our decisions about the future.

So because you can't get your money back either way, your only real choices are: to suffer boredom as you try listen to the rest of the talk or to leave and spend a more pleasant evening elsewhere.

Examples

Canadian payroll programme

In 2018, the Canadian government paid an enormous amount of money[1] to a software developer to fix a payroll program that the developer had created. The government opted to do this instead of paying less money to buy a entirely new system from a different provider.

Concorde

The sunk cost fallacy is sometimes referred to as the Concorde fallacy. This is because the British and French governments, who jointly developed the supersonic aircraft in the 1960s-70s, continued to invest in the project and absorb additional costs even after it became apparent that the idea was not viable economically. Concorde stopped operating in 2003.

What can you do about it?

Recognise the dilemma
Before sunk cost becomes a fallacy, it is a sunk cost dilemma. When we incur costs for something we become personally invested in it, and it is not psychologically easy to discount the investment. Recognising that you are faced with a sunk cost dilemma will help you think more rationally about the problem at hand.

Cut your losses
Quite simply, sometimes the best option is to terminate an unprofitable project, even though a lot had been invested in it. Cut your losses by making decisions based on future benefits and costs only.

Think through other relevant objectives
Some recent research highlights the fact that the sunk cost 'fallacy' is not *always* a fallacy.[2] In some contexts there may be other pertinent considerations: non-monetary considerations (e.g. reputational costs), practical constraints (e.g. time constraints in which you need to deliver a viable if somewhat less-than-perfect product), or political imperatives. Being honest and explicit about what you want to achieve will help you make a rational choice.

Related BI principles

- IKEA effect

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Behavioural Insights for better decision-making

Availability Bias

Description

People are often bad at predicting the future. In particular, we are bad at estimating how likely various events may be. This is because we often base our estimates on how easy it is to remember examples of such events occurring.

For example, people tend to judge natural disasters are more likely after one has recently featured on the news, because an example is now easier to bring to mind.

The availability bias (often called the availability heuristic)[1] is our tendency to give too much weight to the things that come to our minds easily – we tend to conclude that these things are more important and/or more widespread than they are in reality.

Examples

Social reality judgements

Media coverage plays an important role in giving us vivid examples of unlikely events and skewing our estimates. We tend to overestimate the prevalence of low-frequency memorable events (e.g. child kidnapping) if media frequently covers it in vivid detail. Research shows, for example, that people think their worlds are more dangerous when they watch a lot of crime television.[2]

The logic of lotteries

Playing the lottery is a not a rational choice – the chances of winning big are so small that the average player is guaranteed to lose money. Yet, some people are happy to pay the price, in part because lottery organisers spend a lot of time promoting jackpot winners. These easy-to-recall examples of winners contribute to players overestimating their chances of winning.

What can you do about it?

Verify your intuitions with evidence
Unfortunately, availability bias is not something that we can switch off. We can't help but rely on our memory. The best we can do is recognise that our intuitions may be wrong and verify them by gathering further evidence.

Rethink your problem
The availability bias affects our decision-making by locking us into thinking narrowly about the problem. Obvious options occur to us easily, and can dominate our thinking, often at the expense of other uncovered creative options. Spend some time thinking about the context of your problem and try to generate more ideas about what you can do before trying to make a decision about which option to pursue.

Related BI principles

- Anchoring bias
- Focusing illusion

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Behavioural Insights for better decision-making

Captainitis

Description

Leaders are often people who are both smart and experienced. This is usually an advantage to the team; however, research shows that this advantage can turn deadly if not managed properly.

Captainitis is people's tendency to defer to the authority of a leader, and leaders' tendency to fail to notice the impact of their status on those around them.

It gets its name from the sometimes-deadly passivity exhibited by aircraft crew members when the flight captain makes a clearly incorrect decision. Accident investigators have repeatedly identified the role of uncorrected captain errors in serious plane crashes.

Examples

Deadly medication doses

An experiment with hospital staff showed that 95 per cent of nurses (21 out of 22) complied with an unfamiliar doctor's orders to administer an unusually large dose of an unauthorised drug to a real patient.[1]

The danger in being too smart

James Watson, who with his colleague Francis Crick, won a Nobel Prize for discovering the double-helix structure of the DNA, once gave an interview about what made them succeed where others had failed. One of the more unusual reasons he offered was that they were *not* the most intelligent among those trying to crack the DNA code. Rosalind Franklin was the most brilliant scientist working on the problem; the problem was that she was so intelligent that she rarely sought anyone else's advice. 'If you are the brightest person in the room, you are in trouble', Watson said.

What can you do about it?

Engage in collaborative deliberation
Before making important decisions, leaders need to encourage collaborative deliberations with their team. This will mean the decision benefits from diverse inputs and multiple perspectives.

Invite dissent
As a leader, recognise that it is difficult for your followers to challenge your stated opinion. Even if they hold and alternative opinion, most will offer objections only a handful of times, and do so softly, before yielding to your view. If the decision is important, openly invite dissent and be sure to listen.

Speak last
Another way to encourage your team to deliberate openly is to withhold your opinion until much later in the process, so that you can hear the honest opinions of others.

Related BI principles

- Groupthink
- Confirmation bias

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