

# Breaking bias

## *Why learning how the brain works can help people overcome systemic bias*

BY LIZ BERNIER

**We all have biases that are so automatic, so ingrained in our thinking that we're not even aware of them — it's evolutionary.**

The good news? This bias is possible to overcome — but not without understanding why the brain works the way it does, according to Carlos Davidovich, vice-president of executive coaching at Optimum Talent in Toronto.

Davidovich, who worked as a medical doctor for many years, now works as an executive coach in a new area known as neuro-management. Neuromanagement is about understanding how the brain works and connecting that knowledge with organizations and management strategies to optimize success.

### 2 systems

Understanding the brain starts with understanding there are two basic systems in the brain. This is a very simple way to define how the brain works and, therefore, how people behave, said Davidovich at a Strategic Capability Network event in Toronto.

"System 1 is fast at making decisions; system 2 is slow. System 1, what it does is association of ideas; 2 is serial," he said.

System 1 is implicit, effortless, difficult to control or modify, and has no self-awareness; system 2 is effortful, explicit, reflective and deliberately controlled, said Davidovich.

"It looks like the system 2 is always running behind the system 1 because it is faster to make decisions. But it doesn't mean those

decisions are always right," he said.

"One way to see the brain is that through evolution, we didn't replace the brain — nature was adding one (system) over the others."

First, there is the reptilian brain — the oldest system — responsible for pure instincts, said Davidovich.

"The second one we share with big apes and horses — we call it the emotional brain."

That emotional brain is also known as the limbic system, he said. Then, there is the neocortex.

"And this is the only part that makes us human beings: All the learning functions... (are) because of the neocortex," said Davidovich.

The reptilian brain, plus the emotional brain, is called system 1. It's totally unconscious, it's something we've learned for millions of years, he said. And the rational brain is system 2.

### Where is bias found?

The system 1-system 2 dichotomy is an oversimplification, but for the purposes of understanding how bias works, it's very helpful, said Davidovich.

System 1 is responsible for all of our biases and system 2 is the "lazy fact checker," he said.

"We mix up all these unconscious inputs with what we call intuition," he said. "We are bombarded by so many inputs.

"Cognitive biases or 'mind-bugs' — unconscious inference

— is ingrained habits of thought that lead to errors in how we perceive, remember, reason and make decisions."

People think they see the world as it is; that is not true. We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are, said Davidovich.

"All of us have our own lens and there's a filter based on our culture, our education, our influences in the environment, and we build those biases," he said. "Those biases can have a very important purpose so I'm not saying that they're always wrong"

Humans have at least 150 biases that can be defined by name. This is normal — it's the way people connect to each other, said Davidovich.

### Do we need biases?

When it comes to the question of whether we need biases, the answer is pretty simple: Of course we do.

"But what for? Why do we create so many biases in our unconscious mind? Self-protection, mainly. Better safe than sorry. And for many, many years, they were very useful. They were useful to act and react fast enough to survive," he said.

"It takes 100 milliseconds for the brain to decide if a person I don't know is a foe or friend."

And people don't even know they are doing it — humans are much better at detecting and criticizing biased thinking and decision-making in others than in themselves.

"The dynamic principle of existence is survival — and with all respect to the audience, we are very

primitive. The moment we feel fear, we run to the reptilian brain, and we start being defensive," he said. "Pleasure attracts and pain repels — it's as simple as this."

It feels good to be right because it activates the reward circuitry in the brain. It feels bad to be wrong because, in that case, what is activated in the brain is the centre of pain, said Davidovich.

"We make judgments and decisions based on what feels right."

So biases are involved in any situation — conversations, driving, walking, shopping — and they are always there. People's brains are wired to promote fast, efficient information processing. Biases are a kind of cognitive shorthand — a fast passage to safety.

In that way, they can be useful, said Davidovich. But there are also many negative consequences to bias in today's world.

### Negative consequences

Generally, bias is so unconscious, people can't see it, he said.

One example is that of the New York Philharmonic trying blind auditions to correct a massive gender imbalance, he said.

"The first try failed — do you know why? They were able to hear that (the women) were wearing high heels," said Davidovich.

They tried it again, accommodating for that, and now the gender distribution is 50-50.

"(The imbalance) was not about technical capacity — it was about bias and sexism."

Negative consequences of bias can include hiring or promoting the wrong candidate, missing the right candidate, investing in less innovative ideas, missing business opportunities or making snap decisions, he said.

So, how do we stop bias?

"We need to work in a gap — the gap that all of us have between our intentions and our ideals, and our behaviours and actions," he said.

"We live in a world of high complexity, ambiguity, problem volatility. Default solutions don't work

anymore — the more biased we are, the more mistakes we will make in our decisions.

"What we need that will train our brain is diversity of thoughts."

It's not about just "trying to be better" — people need to actually interact with diversity, with diverse opinions and diverse thought, said Davidovich.

"I need to send a lot of messages to my unconscious brain that being in a diverse environment is absolutely fine," he said. "Approach potential solutions from different

perspectives or different opinions.

"When we are always thinking the same way, the probability of a wrong outcome is very high."

People need to activate their system 2 brain instead of simply, unconsciously relying on system 1.

"Are we able to erase all of this information from our system 1? The answer is, no way. Don't even try. What we can do is to revise more often those decisions that are not exactly right — bring in the system 2. Work slowly, we need to think, we need to analyze," he said. "That is the

way to start changing the system 1.

"And that means increasing or raising the level of awareness in the way I talk, in the way I connect with people. Can I do it by myself? Yes and no. It's better to help each other on this — it's very difficult to do it by yourself."

People need to accept that they can be wrong and, for many of us, that's not easy, he said.

"I don't want to feel that I'm wrong," he said. "But if I'm aware of this, and I accept I can be wrong, then I can start walking the new path."