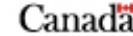




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## WEB EXCLUSIVE: Bias Affects All People and Projects

**Recognize and manage your bias, and put your experience to work.**

*By: J.F. McCarthy*

Bias is the influence of instincts, previous experience, and purpose on the execution of a task. All human beings are biased in some way.

On a business level, people are biased against hostile and unpredictable superiors who may withhold benefits or fire them. The same is true with suppliers and vendors who have not performed as promised -- be they inferior goods, late deliveries, or changing prices. On a job site level, people may have a preference for a particular brand and model of tools because of superior productivity, less down time, and a comfort level produced by past use.

Bias can be viewed as good if someone is "experienced" or bad if someone is "prejudiced." Prejudice is experience that fails to recognize that your point of view may have been a little wrong -- changed conditions now make it a lot more wrong. Prejudice also fails to recognize that although your viewpoint is right for your purpose, a different viewpoint may be equally right for a different purpose.

The person who claims to be unbiased has not identified or recognized his bias, and therefore cannot manage it. He is either inexperienced, uninformed, or an arrogant fool poised to make the next big mistake. Your task here is to identify and admit your bias, then manage it -- use

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experience well and control the prejudice.

If you are a hammer, everything looks like a nail

Everyone sees their world through the lens of their previous experience and present purpose. This determines the point of view from which all observations are made. Achievement of the purpose is evaluated by incentives, personal satisfactions and dissatisfactions. A concrete cement finisher is judged by how many square feet is finished per day at an acceptable quality. A project manager/estimator is judged both by estimates that gain the contract, and completion of the project at a cost less than the estimate.

Incentives are hard quantifiable goals and rewards: production targets to be met, job retention or bonuses to be received. Satisfactions are the reasons you are doing the job to start with -- you like to work with your hands, like to build things, like to be outside, like doing new things, or like the people you work with. Dissatisfactions are the things you complain about -- meaningless paperwork, arbitrary changes, bosses who won't listen, or inadequate tools.

Incentives, satisfactions, and dissatisfactions are mixed together in the real world -- production goals are met, you keep your job, you have pride in work well done, and the boss is off your back -- all at the same time. To clearly recognize your bias, the incentives, satisfactions, and dissatisfactions must be evaluated one at a time. Incentives are how the purpose is defined, how success will be measured, and what you get if you succeed. Satisfactions include why you are doing the job, what you like about it, and what makes you proud. Dissatisfactions include what you want to minimize or avoid as much as possible. Once each is recognized, and mixed together, management becomes possible.

"Follow the money" or how people get paid (or profit), is often identified as the main motivator and influence on a person's point of view, but this is seldom true. People have one nature and one speed. "I do it because this is what I am," "I feel this is the right thing to do," "I have always done it this way, and it works" -- all matters of personal pride and satisfaction -- usually come before money. People act the way they want to act as long as they can make enough money to continue acting that way.


Recognizing your bias -- to control it

Recognition of your bias is the first and largest step towards managing it. Questions such as:

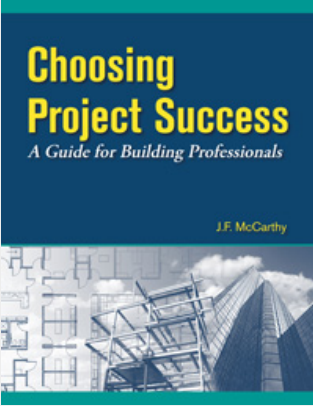
- "What tasks take up most of your day?"
- "What gives you satisfaction with your job?"
- "How is your work evaluated?"
- "How are you rewarded and paid?"

help to understand your point of view.

Photos In This Story



J.F. McCarthy  
[Full caption and actual photo size](#)



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The complex block contains two images. The top image is a portrait of J.F. McCarthy, a man with glasses wearing a suit and tie. The bottom image is the cover of the book 'Choosing Project Success: A Guide for Building Professionals' by J.F. McCarthy. The cover features a blue background with yellow text and a photograph of a building under construction.

These questions also help to understand that people spending their days on very different tasks, with different satisfactions and rewards, will have different points of view and bias that are valid for their purpose.

For example, if pouring and finishing concrete floor slabs requires and is evaluated for high production levels, the foreman will tend to be focused on rapid installation of the largest, easiest parts of the slab. Missing electrical conduit that should be embedded in the slab will require costly rework, or boxing out portions of the slab -- requiring uneconomic comebacks. But his bias towards high production might make him actually believe that he is 95% complete; however, rework and comebacks make the job far less complete. A project manager who is motivated to finish not just the concrete, but also the entire job for less than his estimate will be very sensitive to the costly rework. He will manage his potential bias because he recognized it.

## Two heads are better than one

After you recognize your bias, the next step in managing the bias is to have another person, with a different bias, evaluate the same situation.

A common business example is the requirement for two signatures on a check. This simple act of two people thinking "is this payment right?" helps avoid incorrect payments and fraud.

The same idea is used if a foreman -- biased to show lots of production -- reports the labor hours expended, while an estimator or project manager -- biased to show low costs -- reports the amount of work executed. The agreement of these two that the concrete slab is acceptably complete can be further reinforced by the agreement of others -- the plumber and electrician agree that all the required items are embedded in the slab and the floor-covering contractor accepts the slab.

## Summary

Recognizing your bias and putting measures in place to manage it are extremely important. A slight adjustment in attitude can increase communication and understanding, and can help avoid costly mistakes. Once the negative aspects of bias are controlled, the benefits of the positive aspect of bias - experience -- can be put to work. Your talent, training, and experience, if controlled, can produce the judgments and intuition necessary to develop and execute workable approaches that will probably succeed.

*J.F. McCarthy has worked as a general contractor in the United States for 37 years. This is an excerpt from his new book, **Choosing Project Success: A Guide for Building Professionals**, which was recently named a finalist in the 2008 Next Generation Indie Book Awards. He is a graduate of the Dunwoody Industrial Institute, where he focused on construction management, and earned a Bachelor's degree in architecture at the University of Minnesota and a Master's degree in business at Keller Graduate School. For more information, visit [www.paretobi.com](http://www.paretobi.com)*

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