



Bias Bite #6: The Bandwagon Effect

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Bias Bites are written for administrators to help teachers explore their cognitive limitations through suggested protocols that can be implemented in school-wide meetings and other professional development opportunities. The following activities guide teachers to explore the bandwagon effect, which is our tendency to adopt behaviors and beliefs primarily because others are doing so. While this cognitive shortcut can promote social cohesion and efficiency in decision-making, it can also lead to suppression of critical thinking and poor decisions based on popularity rather than merit. The structured learning experiences in this Bias Bite provide educators with a more thorough understanding of this bias. They also help educators develop greater humility and awareness of their cognitive limitations, fostering more spaces for civil discourse in their schools.



Driving Question

Why do people often support popular opinions?

Materials Needed

- A popular song or the video “Sasquatch Music Festival 2009—Guy Starts Dance Party”
- Mental Notes graphic organizers for students

Bias Description

The bandwagon effect is a cognitive shortcut that leads individuals to adopt certain behaviors and beliefs, primarily because others are doing so. This phenomenon is fueled by the perception that the majority's actions or opinions are indicative of correctness or desirability, often resulting in individuals conforming to group norms.

Every bias has its pros and cons. The pros and cons of the bandwagon effect are as follows:

- Social cohesion. The bandwagon effect heuristic can create a sense of belonging and group identity.
- Increased efficiency. This pro is particularly true when information is limited or time is constrained.
- Suppression of individuality. Critical thinking may be suppressed in people who conform to group norms.
- Poor decision-making. Basing decisions on the popularity of the ideas rather than their merits can lead to misguided and faulty judgments.

Bias in Action: School-Based Examples

- Students might adopt a negative attitude toward performing well in a class when they base their decisions on their peers' opinions and don't form their own judgments.
- A school implements a new policy because of its popularity among staff rather than its effectiveness or necessity for student learning.

Professional Development Protocol for School Leaders

ACTIVATE

- Activity 1: Select a popular song with lyrics, OR see Activity 2:
 - Select several confidants in the group and instruct them to begin singing and dancing to the song when the music starts.

- Continue playing the song and encourage the rest of the educators to sing/dance along with the educators who started the singing or dancing.
- Engage educators in the reflection questions below.
- Activity 2
 - Show the video “Sasquatch Music Festival 2009—Guy Starts Dance Party.”
 - Engage educators in the reflection questions below.
- Reflection Questions
 - At the beginning, why did few people sing and dance (in Activity 1) or dance (in Activity 2)?
 - Why did some people decide to join in?
 - Did the educators observe a change in the initiators' behavior? (For example, in Activity 1, did the initiators sing less loudly after a while?) Why or why not?
 - Think about a time when you were on a bandwagon and a time you were not.
 - Have you ever been in the public minority when making a decision? How did being in the minority affect your confidence in your choice? Why?
 - How do you feel when others approve of your actions? How does this approval affect your confidence and behavior?
 - Which do you think is generally more influential: others' opinions or facts? Which would you prefer to have in support of your decision?

EXPLAIN

- Introduce the definition of the bandwagon effect.
- Explain why the bandwagon effect occurs.
 - The bandwagon effect is fueled by the perception that the majority's actions or opinions are indicative of correctness or desirability. This perception often leads to the suppression of an individual's critical thinking as they conform to group norms and espouse a group's popular ideas.
- Provide examples.
 - Some examples you might share are social media trends, online reviews/ratings, sports team allegiances, and so on.
- Share mitigation strategies.
 - Slow down your decision-making.
 - Actively try to make decisions in environments where you don't feel pressured by other people.
 - Intentionally elevate minority views and perspectives.

DISCUSS

- Divide educators into groups and discuss scenarios using the following guiding questions.
 - What is the relationship between this bias and other biases?
 - How can the bandwagon effect show up in schools for different stakeholders (e.g., students, teachers, administrators, families)?
 - Under what conditions or in what situations are we most susceptible to this bias?
 - How could one recognize when this bias is affecting them?
 - What are some strategies to overcome this bias?
 - What is the relationship between this bias and humility? In what ways can our awareness of this bias improve civil discourse?

SYNTHESIZE

- Revisit the driving question and have participants respond.