

How to Sustain Flexible Thinking and Nimble Action

By Susan Robertson

To survive the pandemic, companies were forced to adapt very quickly to radically new circumstances. Even large organizations - where it's typically difficult to shift directions quickly - managed to accomplish it. Leaders discovered that, when required, their organization could act much more quickly and nimbly than they normally do.

So, the obvious questions are 1) What was different? And 2) How can you "hardwire" this flexibility into your organization so it continues to be stronger in the future?

What was Different?

All humans have a set of cognitive biases, which are mental shortcuts that are used for problem solving and decision making.

To be clear, cognitive biases are NOT individual or personal biases. They are a neuroscience phenomenon that all humans share. It's also important to understand that they operate subconsciously; they affect your thinking in ways that you don't realize.

You have two different thinking systems, commonly known as System 1 and System 2, sometimes referred to as thinking fast (1) and thinking slow (2).

System 1 is the "intuitive," quick, and easy thinking that we do most of the time. In fact, it accounts for about 98% of our thinking. It doesn't require a lot of mental effort; we do it easily, quickly, and without having to think about that fact that we're thinking.

System 2 thinking is deeper thinking - the kind that's required for complex problem solving and decision making. This deeper thinking requires more effort and energy; it literally uses more calories. Since it's less energy efficient, our brain automatically and subconsciously defaults to the easier System 1 thinking whenever it can, to save effort.

Cognitive biases result when our brain tries to stay in System 1 thinking, when perhaps it should be in System 2. The outcome is often sub-optimal solutions and/or poor decision making. But we don't realize that we have sub-optimized because all of this has happened subconsciously.

In typical circumstances, several of these cognitive biases conspire to make us perceive that continuing as we are - with only slower, incremental changes - seems like the best decision. It feels familiar, it feels lower risk, in sum - it feels smarter. Choosing to do nothing different is - very often - simply the default. It frequently doesn't even feel like we made a decision; instead it feels like we were really smart for NOT making a potentially risky decision.

But during the pandemic, changing nothing, or changing very slowly, were simply not options. This particular situation was so unique that our brains didn't have the choice to stay in short-cut System 1 thinking. System 2 thinking was required. Since we consciously realized we MUST change - quickly, our brains started literally working harder in System 2 - and the normal cognitive biases weren't a factor.

How to Continue to Be More Nimble in the Future

The key to maintaining flexible thinking and nimble behavior is to not allow our brains to fall into the trap of cognitive biases. Obviously, since these are intuitive and subconscious responses, this is not easy task. But there are proven ways that we can better manage our brains. Here are a few ways to start.

Knock out the Negativity Bias. Negativity Bias is the phenomenon that negative experiences have a greater impact on your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors than positive experiences. So, you are much more highly motivated to avoid negative than we are to seek out positive. The way this manifest in your daily work is that we are much more prone to reject new ideas than to accept them, because rejecting ideas *feels* like we're avoiding potential negative.

Respond to "yes but..." with "what if...?" This requires a dedicated and conscious mental effort, by everyone on the team, to monitor their own and the team's response to new ideas. Every time "yes, but..." is uttered, the response needs to be "What if we could solve that?" This reframing of the problem into a question will trigger our brains to look for solutions, instead of instantly rejecting the idea.

Short Circuit the Status Quo Bias

The Status Quo bias is a subconscious preference for the current state of affairs. We use "current" as a mental reference point, and any change from that is perceived as a loss. As a result, we frequently overestimate the risk of a change, and dramatically underestimate the risk of "business as usual."

When weighing a choice of possible actions, be sure to overly list "do nothing" as one of the choices, so you are forced to acknowledge it is a choice. Also include "risk" as one of the evaluation criteria and force the team to list all the possible risks. Then comes the difficult part - remind the team that their subconscious brain is making them perceive the risks of doing nothing to be lower than the reality, so they should multiply the possibility of each of those risks.

Curtail the Curse of Knowledge. In any subject where we have some expertise, we also have many subconscious assumptions about that subject. Under normal circumstance, this Curse of Knowledge (these latent assumptions) limits our thinking and suppresses our ability to come up with radically new ideas.

Rely on advisors who don't have the same Curse of Knowledge. In other words, seek out advice from people outside of your industry. When evaluating ideas or actions, these outsiders won't have the same blinders that you have, so they will likely have a more clear-eyed view of the benefits and risks.

The bad news is that cognitive biases are always going to be a factor in our problem-solving and decision making; they're hard-wired into us. The good news is that, with some dedicated and continuous mental effort, we can mitigate them and become nimbler in the face of change.

About the Author:

Susan Robertson empowers individuals, teams, and organizations to more nimbly adapt to change, by transforming thinking from "why we can't" to "how might we?" She is a creative thinking expert with over 20 years of experience coaching Fortune 500 companies. As an instructor on applied creativity at Harvard, Susan brings a scientific foundation to enhancing human creativity. To learn more, please go to: www.SusanRobertson.co.

