

## How to avoid the authority bias to affect the quality of decisions

“What are you doing here? The birthday party is next week Saturday... That is not to say you are not welcome, to the contrary, but...” This is how one of our long-time friends welcomed my wife and me recently. We appeared at the right doorstep, but at the wrong time. Embarrassed and amused I looked at my wife, who had assured me of this timing. We had both received the invitation email. After I had seen my wife putting the appointment in our family calendar, I had (unwisely) decided to ignore it. When my wife puts down an appointment, who am I to doubt the accuracy?

Trying to reconstruct the *logic of failure*<sup>1</sup>, I later wondered why we gave our friends a surprise party last Saturday. Obviously, my wife and I both made mistakes. My wife mixed up the timings. These things happen; I am the last one to blame her. My mistake, however, was more interesting. I believe I suffered from the authority bias, which I will now elucidate.

In my 2017 book<sup>2</sup> I describe the various ways in which humans generate knowledge. Commonly we distinguish knowledge generation by its various sources:

- authority.
- habit of thought.
- rationalism.
- empiricism.

Human knowledge is generated through authority when the source of the data that underpins the knowledge is trusted by default. When at a social function you are introduced to someone that shakes your hand and mentions her name, you take it for granted that you now know the person by her name. The fact that a person introduces herself with a name does normally not make you doubt the correctness of that name. Upon the authority of that person you now generated the knowledge of that person's name.

What is true for a name may also hold true for an appointment in your family calendar. This is especially true when your reliable and accurate wife has put the appointment in. Upon her authority I knew the birthday party's supposed timing.

Whenever things like this happen to me, I go look for a pattern. When did this happen to me before? How did it happen? What apparent cues were present when it happened? What script did unroll after it happened? What does this tell me on how to prevent it from happening again? This case was no exception. Again, I ran my checklist and through my memory.

My memory helped me to another case that seemed similar. In this case, however, there had not been an embarrassing surprise party. Here's what happened. A fellow young scientist colleague and I once had to review abstracts that had been submitted for an upcoming scientific conference. When the abstract met minimum standards of scientific elegance, the submitting party would be invited to present the paper at the conference. One abstract had been issued by a big name in my specialism. He embodied Chemical Engineering with two capitals. His abstract,

however, didn't make much scientific sense. My colleague who reviewed it was in doubt. Who was he to think the expert could be wrong and he could be right? Confused he approached our faculty's own distinguished professor, sharing his dilemma. Our professor just smiled.

"So, you think he's wrong, right? Well, that's correct. It is not the first time he's off. He's such a big name now, he thinks he can get away with anything. Glad you don't see it that way. Reject the abstract."

The birthday and the abstract episode seemed to teach me two lessons:

- trust in authority is good but thinking for yourself is always better.
  - even my wife occasionally makes mistakes.
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#### notes

- .1. Inspired by Dörner, D., [1996], The logic of failure – recognizing and avoiding error in complex situations, Basic Books, New York.
- .2. Elgersma, E. [2017], The Strategic Analysis Cycle – Handbook – how advanced data collection and analysis underpins winning strategies, LID Publishing Ltd., London.