Taking the bias out of meetings

The biases that undermine strategic decision making often operate in meetings. Here is a menu of ideas for running them in a way that will mitigate the impact of those biases. Not every suggestion will be applicable to all types of decisions or organizations, but paying attention to the principles underlying these ideas should pay dividends for any executive trying to run meetings that lead to sounder decisions.

Make sure the right people are involved

Ensure diversity of backgrounds, roles, risk aversion profiles, and interests; cultivate critics within the top team.

Invite contributions based on expertise, not rank. Don't hesitate to invite expert contributors to come and present a point of view without attending the entire meeting.

For the portion of the meeting where a decision is going to be made, keep attendance to a minimum, preferably with a team that has experience making decisions together. This loads the dice in favor of depersonalized debate by eliminating executives' fear of exposing their subordinates to conflict and also creates, over time, an environment of trust among that small group of decision makers.

Assign homework

Make sure predecision due diligence is based on accurate, sufficient, and independent facts and on appropriate analytical techniques.

Request alternatives and "out of the box" plans—for instance, by soliciting input from outsiders to the decision-making process.

Consider setting up competing fact-gathering teams charged with investigating opposing hypotheses.

Create the right atmosphere

As the final decision maker, ask others to speak up (starting with the most junior person); show you can change your mind based on their input; strive to create a "peerlike" atmosphere.

Encourage admissions of individual experiences and interests that create possible biases.

Encourage expressions of doubt and create a climate that recognizes reasonable people may disagree when discussing difficult decisions.

Encourage substantive disagreements on the issue at hand by clearly dissociating it from personal conflict, using humor to defuse tension.

Manage the debate

Before you get going, make sure everyone knows the meeting's purpose (making a decision) and the criteria you will be using to make that decision. For recurring decisions (such as R&D portfolio reviews), make it clear to everyone that those criteria include "forcing devices" (such as comparing projects against one another).

Take the pulse of the room: ask participants to write down their initial positions, use voting devices, or ask participants for their "balance sheets" of pros and cons.

Use the premortem technique to expand the debate.

Counter anchoring: postpone the introduction of numbers if possible; "reframe" alternative courses of action as they emerge by making explicit "what you have to believe" to support each of the alternatives.

Pay attention to the use of comparisons and analogies: limit the use of inappropriate ones ("inadmissible evidence") by asking for alternatives and suggesting or requesting additional analogies.

Force the room to consider opposing views. For vital decisions, create an explicit role for one or two people—the "decision challengers."

Follow up

Commit yourself to the decision. Debate should stop when the decision is made. Connect individually with initial dissenters and make sure implementation plans address their concerns to the extent possible.

Monitor pre–agreed upon criteria and milestones to correct your course or move on to backup plans.

Conduct a postmortem on the decision once its outcome is known.

Periodically step back and review decision processes to improve meeting preparation and mechanics, using an outside observer to diagnose possible sources of bias.