

# Positive Biases: More Dangerous Than You Think

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What do you think of these statements?

1. “All Latinos are experts in Latino culture.”
2. “All Gay men are artistic.”
3. “All women are naturally nurturing.”
4. “All Asians are good at math.”
5. “All black men are athletic.”

I don’t know about you, but I’d love to be an expert in Latino culture and even a tiny-shred of artistic ability would come in handy since I am contemplating redecorating my living room. My daughter sometimes complains that I could do a little better in the nurturing department and my math skills? I don’t even want to go there. As for rhythm, one glance at my pathetic efforts at Salsa dancing at my step-daughter’s wedding will answer that question.

In short, I would love to have any of these qualities – most of us would. Because of that desire, it’s tempting to look at statements like these as compliments anyone would enjoy. The unfortunate truth is that, because they are inflexible generalities as opposed to factual comments about the nature of one human being, each of these statements clearly reflects a bias (an “inflexible belief about a particular category of people”).

Nowhere does it say that biases are confined to insults and beliefs in the inferiority of a group. In fact, positive biases are almost as apt as negative ones to interfere with our ability to lead effectively. This is because any type of inflexible belief prevents us from seeing an individual for who they are and for what they have to offer.

The case of Harry and team member George tells the tale. Harry, a manager at a large California bank, has a bias that goes something like this: “All Latinos are familiar with their culture, speak Spanish, and regard it as an honor to work with ‘their own.’” As a result of this inflexible belief, Harry transferred George – a promising branch manager who happens to have a Spanish last name – to a region where most customers were

Mexican immigrants. On the surface, this seems like a reasonable decision – match George’s heritage to the culture of the customer.

What Harry failed to realize was that George, despite his last name, had little affinity for nor interest in his Latino heritage. As he put it, “There’s more to me than having a grandfather from Mexico. I barely understand much less speak Spanish, and, quite frankly, the culture doesn’t interest me much.”

The upshot of this positive bias was that, because of discomfort with his new work setting, George quit to work for another bank. As a result of George’s decision to leave, Harry lost a quality team member to the competition.

What other ways might positive biases interfere with effective decision making?

1. Because of a positive bias we assume an applicant to be good at something (“all Asians are good at technology”; “All woman are good at building relationships.”) when, in fact, they are not.
2. Similarly, because of a positive bias, we might not offer support to a team member because we assume they don’t need it.
3. Perhaps most insidiously, “confirmation bias” (the tendency to see what we expect to see) might cause us to actually think someone is doing a better job than they are.
4. Finally, and this is where it gets really scary, positive biases can cause us to actually feel anger toward those who do not conform to the trait we so optimistically assigned to them. When this happens, we are apt to feel somehow betrayed and unconsciously mutter to ourselves, “What’s wrong with them, they were supposed to be....”

Positive biases, more dangerous, and less accurate, than you think.