# Why leaders must keep their ego in check

*We all have an ego. It plays a crucial role in creating a sense of consistency and continuity in our lives, allowing us to differentiate ourselves from others and mediating between the experience of self and reality. However, if left unchecked, the ego can pose big problems in the workplace.* **Nikita** *and* **Grace Lordan** *list five of these problems and discuss how a leader can take steps to mitigate them.*

Contemporary [psychologists](#) have defined "ego" as an essential aspect of an individual's self that shapes identity and guides behaviour. The ego allows us to differentiate ourselves from others and mediates between the experience of self and reality. Moreover, the ego's need for consistency can drive us to act in ways that align with a [positive and consistent](#) self-image. As a result, we can behave in ways that make us feel better about ourselves. While this is beneficial in maintaining a healthy positive self-image, the problem arises when the ego becomes so strong that it overrides our better judgment, causing us to overlook evidence that contradicts our beliefs or actions. As a result, not only do diversity and inclusion in the workplace get compromised but you will also end up with sub-optimal decisions and lower levels of innovation.

The ego plays a crucial role in creating a sense of consistency and continuity in our lives by connecting our past experiences to our present and future behaviours. However, if left unchecked, it can pose big problems in the workplace. In this article, we delve into what these problems are, and how a leader can take steps to mitigate them.

## Egocentric bias

Egocentric bias is the [tendency](#) to have overconfidence in one's abilities, stemming from an individual's attachment to their own self-image. When left unchecked, this bias causes a leader to become entrenched in their own perspective and avoid situations where they are challenged. Egocentric bias is a pure hindrance in the workplace.

Knowing this, self-aware leaders will take steps to address their tendency to shy away from challenge so they can simply feel good about themselves. They seek out diverse perspectives and encourage critical feedback of their ideas by their colleagues. They are also aware that critical feedback can trigger an emotional response. When this happens they acknowledge the emotion caused by being confronted by the unfamiliar and question their critic with curiosity, in an attempt to see things from their perspective. When the emotion triggered is strong, they will take time out before starting their curious questioning.

## Status quo bias

Stemming from a desire for stability, status quo bias is the tendency to prefer things to remain exactly as they are, even when better options exist. It causes leaders to fall for suboptimal acceptance of their own defaults. This tendency worsens  when leaders are faced with complex decision-making.

Moving out of status quo bias requires change. Leaders who are self-aware recognise that most human beings resist change, and they take steps to address this resistance in themselves. They are aware that when an innovative outlier idea is raised by a colleague, status quo bias can cause an ego-driven knee-jerk reaction that disregards the idea so the status quo is preserved. Self-aware leaders stop this tendency by always having a framework of discussing the costs, benefits and risks of any new idea raised. The initial onus for providing this information is on the person raising the idea, ensuring that their idea gets a platform for discussion. Proceeding in this way allows a clearer identification of whether the reluctance is driven by data or emotion. Self-aware leaders will also explore how innovative outlier ideas can be quickly piloted on a smaller scale. This strategy is another way to move away from status quo bias given that it pivots from all-or-nothing thinking towards a "fail fast and learn" approach.

## Confirmation bias

Confirmation bias is the tendency to seek out and interpret information in a way that confirms one's existing beliefs while ignoring or discounting information that contradicts those beliefs.

Owing to confirmation bias, leaders too often (perhaps unintentionally) ignore

information that is inconsistent with their own beliefs and seek, recall, and favour information that supports their existing views. Partaking in confirmation bias ultimately supports the ego. Leaders who succumb to their ego and seek out confirmation surround themselves with people 'like themselves'. What better way to preserve a fragile ego than to surround yourself with people who think just like you? This may be good for your ego, but it is bad for business.

Self-aware leaders will always take steps to overcome their tendency for confirmation bias. They actively seek out diverse perspectives, engage with dissenting opinions, and are willing to reconsider one's assumptions and beliefs in light of new information.

Self-aware leaders often use red teams or devil's advocates to help their team to constructively challenge their beliefs when they are making a high-stake decision. These designated individuals are tasked with constructively challenging the leader's assumptions, offering alternative viewpoints and identifying potential blind spots. Another tactic is to start the meeting by saying 'if we all agree, the wrong person is in the room', priming team members from the beginning to move away from confirmation bias towards challenging the leader's beliefs.

## Mirrortocracy

A high-ego leader with low levels of self-awareness prefer to be surrounded by people like 'them'. This causes them to hire and promote in line with a "mirrortocracy" rather than a meritocracy. Mirrortocracy is a workplace culture in which those in positions of power tend to hire and promote people who share similar characteristics or backgrounds, such as gender, race, or educational background.

Hiring in line with a mirrortocracy is clearly bad for business. It also has negative ramifications on the opportunities for diverse talent. For example, Brodnock and Lordan (2021) demonstrate that the mirrortocracy blocks the progression of Black women in the financial services and technology sectors.

Self-aware leaders take steps to avoid affinity-based hiring and promotions. Today artificial intelligence can be used effectively in these processes. For example, AI has been shown to outperform humans in predicting hiring outcomes and can be trained to recognise and avoid human bias. Research also suggests that evaluating candidates

based on skills rather than relying on educational degrees can result in [improved job outcomes](#). Therefore, self-aware leaders can rely less on interviews and use task-based assessments to identify non-traditional candidates with the relevant skills and abilities for the job.

## Groupthink

A high-ego leader's need for consistency is [strongest in a group settings](#), where individuals are motivated to conform to the norms and values of the group, leading to groupthink. Conforming in this way reinforces a sense of identity and provides a sense of belonging to the group. Overall, these dynamics provide consistency for the ego.

Groupthink is a significant obstacle to innovative discussions, posing challenges in meetings where teams aim to solve complex problems or devise new strategies, ultimately leading to suboptimal outcomes. To counter this, self-aware leaders monitor meetings for signs of groupthink by analysing who speaks too much or too little, which identifies the voices that need to be quietened and those to be elevated in future discussions. Further, holding [team reflexivity](#) conversations, in which teams reflect on and discuss their team experiences and processes, can help leaders understand their diverse talent and ensure all voices are heard.

## Conclusion

Effectively managing ego in the workplace necessitates that managers actively seek out and consider diverse perspectives and contrary evidence. Following the suggestions mentioned here will assist leaders in becoming more self-aware and effective. The result being that their decision-making process is not driven by their ego and limited by their own biases.

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