

# Talking Through the Bias

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One of the biggest challenges in turning around the fortunes of a community is in finding a way to effectively communicate about the change that is coming. Change, even good change, can rile up the NIMBYs (Not In My Back Yard), the CAVEs (Citizens Against Virtually Everything), and the FEARS (Fire-up Everyone Against Reasonable Solutions), making it difficult to make progress. The most effective way to understand how to communicate successfully with people is to understand the biases they start with.

People have all types of biases that lie beneath the surface and can prevent them from hearing your message, no matter how frequently or how loudly you say it. Some people believe all politicians are liars, or that all administration is lazy. Still others believe that all business owners are greedy, or that government involvement is the only way to ensure fairness. Without understanding those biases, the effectiveness of your communication strategy will be compromised.

The most significant bias we don't realize we possess is confirmation bias. It is exemplified in popular internet search engines. When we look something up on the internet, the most common search engines use our search history to gather results. That means the results generated by our searches are distinctly connected to our historic interests. If you have been looking for a place to retire in Arizona, and I have been looking for information on how to design seniors' retirement homes, but we both search for "senior's housing", we will get very different results. Mine will generate pages of information on developers and design options, and yours will likely generate properties for sale near new golf courses in warm climates.

What that means for communication is profound. If I click on links that say that one presidential candidate is horrible, but not on the links that say that candidate is the best choice, over time the search engine returns results that confirm the candidate is horrible and exclude the others, because that is what I have been looking for. We are deliberately being provided with information that reinforces our beliefs. We aren't presented with divergent or contrary viewpoints. What we believe to be true, whether it is or not, is constantly confirmed for us. Hence, confirmation bias.

This translates into our day to day offline lives as well. Most of us have a group of friends we hang out with most often. Very few of us keep a lot of close contrarian friends-friends that would regularly disagree with us. Rather, we make friends with those who think and act like we do, for the most part. As we remain friends, we tend to begin to share opinions, thoughts, feelings and ideas. We grow closer and have more in common with each other. That means, much like a search engine, as time goes by we tend to get stronger confirmation from our closest friends. The longer and closer the friendships are, the stronger and faster the confirmation occurs.

Communicating new information, especially anything that may challenge people's beliefs or instigate change, is difficult to do when confirmation bias is so powerful. One member of the group may express an idea that is contrary to the group's long-held belief, but that opinion won't go far. Someone may say, "I like the new initiative by the town," but if the group generally shares the belief that the town officials are not out to serve the public, the positive remark will be met with expressions of doubt: "They are just doing it to keep the heat *off* because of the election," or "they don't really care about us," or "I don't

care if it looks good. They are all still corrupt." The contrary thought dies as quickly as a link that never gets clicked.

Communication strategies must find a way to break through those biases, especially the most powerful and dangerous confirmation biases. If you can't find a way to get through them, your message will be lost, and so will your hope for change and success.

*This syndicated content is provided by Doug Griffiths, best-selling author and chief community builder at 13 Ways, a company with a mission to push communities to face their challenges to find their unique path to success. For more information visit [www.13ways.ca](http://www.13ways.ca), or we can start the conversation at [info@13ways.ca](mailto:info@13ways.ca).*