

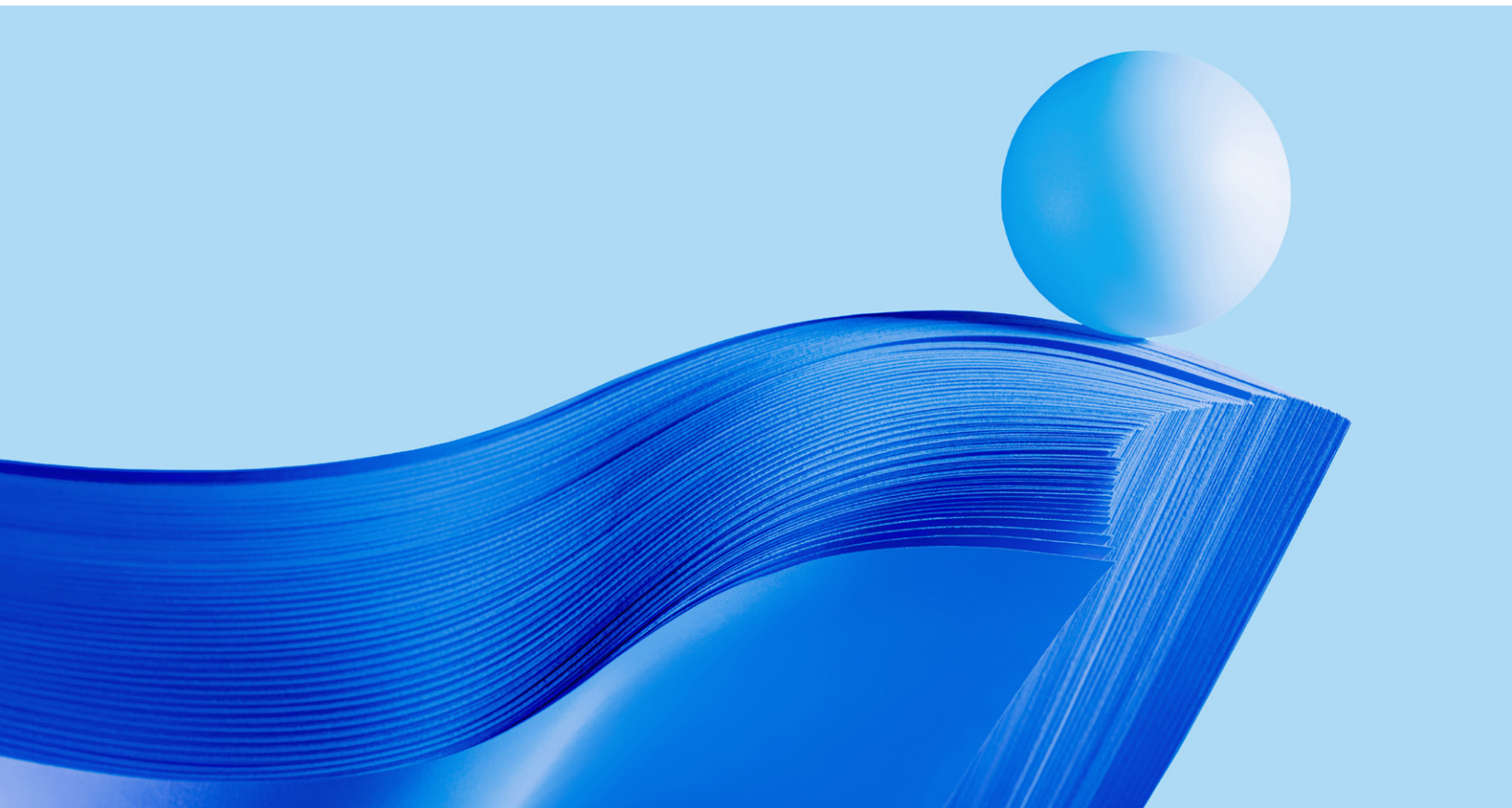
Despite their best intentions, executives fall prey to cognitive and organizational biases that get in the way of good decision making. In this series, we highlight some of them and offer a few effective ways to address them.

Our topic this time?

Bias Busters

A better way to brainstorm

by Eileen Kelly Rinaudo, Tim Koller, and Derek Schatz



The dilemma

The regional CEO of a large US cosmetics company has invited all the business unit leaders to brainstorm about M&A priorities and potential opportunities in the new year. Everyone knows that digital acquisitions have been a pet project for the senior-leadership team. But some business unit heads believe the company should look at other targets as well—expanding overseas, for instance, where the cosmetics market is booming, or investing in organic beauty products or a men's grooming line. Ahead of the call, some of the business unit heads even prepare pages to support these ideas, citing links to current businesses, trend analyses, and so on. On the call itself, however, the regional CEO steers most of the conversation to digital-growth opportunities—again. Frustrated, some business unit leaders stay silent, and the brainstorming proceeds in a pro forma way, with little debate, as the group circles back to the same priorities and growth opportunities everyone has heard many times before.

How can the regional CEO convene a more productive brainstorming session?

The research

When it comes to group interactions in the workplace, individuals are particularly vulnerable to *motivations to conform*.¹ The reasons we conform are varied, but according to a five-part model developed by professors Paul Nail, Geoff MacDonald, and David Levy, they can include the need to avoid rejection and conflict, accomplish group goals, or establish one's identity.² After all, why undercut a superior's views or challenge an opinionated CEO if it means somehow diminishing one's own power, influence, or authority? This risk aversion is a big factor in the success or failure of brainstorming sessions. Consider the situation at the cosmetics company. The leadership team's desire to explore digital targets was well known in the company, and once that idea was propagated by the regional CEO, some business unit heads were deflated: to speak out against it could be viewed as a repudiation of existing priorities. Individuals' motivations to conform created an environment in which mediocre ideas were allowed to flourish and true change was less likely to happen.

Anonymous brainstorming, along with silent voting, can serve as a counterweight to individuals' motivations to conform and help contributors feel like their expertise and ideas are being fairly considered.

¹ "Conformity," *Psychology Today*, January 8, 2022.

² David A. Levy, Geoff MacDonald, and Paul R. Nail, "Proposal of a four-dimensional model of social response," *Psychological Bulletin*, June 2000, Volume 126, Number 3.

The remedy

Anonymous brainstorming, along with silent voting, can serve as a counterweight to individuals' motivations to conform and help contributors feel like their expertise and ideas are being fairly considered. To understand how this works, let's reconsider the brainstorming session at the cosmetics company. To ensure that all ideas are truly weighted equally, the regional CEO could appoint a facilitator to collect ideas written on pieces of paper, for instance, or submitted through a central software application. (This step would be managed ahead of the brainstorming session.) During brainstorming, ideas would not be presented in a specific order or tied to specific sources, which would free up business unit heads and other company leaders to offer proposals that may run counter to the senior-

leadership team's well-known digital stance. The facilitator could then read aloud the list of submissions, and the business unit heads could vote on them independently (and anonymously) to reveal the degree of alignment behind each idea. Once the submissions have been vetted and reprioritized, the group could repeat the silent-voting process until a clear choice can be made.

No question, this type of structured facilitation will take more time and effort than a traditional brainstorming session—but it has the potential to reveal truly original business initiatives that may not have come to light had participants' reputations been on the line. Using a structured approach to brainstorming removes some of the risks that can thwart honest discussion.

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