Cognitive bias in product management

10 traps product managers can avoid

Product managers today face a unique challenge. Not only do they need to design and build innovative features, they have to understand how those features are going to drive value for customers and advance key business goals.

Left unchecked, cognitive biases can lead to misalignment between what you build and what customers want or the business needs. Do you know how cognitive bias may be affecting how you work or make product decisions?

1. Confirmation bias

Seeking out sources, points of view, and supporting materials that confirm one's prior view or stance on an issue.

Bias in the wild

A PM who favors one version of a product roadmap seeks to build "consensus" by soliciting feedback from colleagues they know will agree in advance and avoiding it from those who may not.

2. Halo effect

Building a positive holistic picture of a path, product, or person based on one or a few traits that don't justify doing so.

Bias in the wild

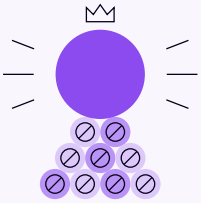
Product teams may want to take a certain path on a feature based on preliminary positive anecdotal feedback from one "superuser," obscuring real issues or problems that would otherwise come to light.

3. Sunk cost fallacy

Following through on a project or feature that may not be right or may even be doomed to fail, simply because one has already put a ton of work into it.

Bias in the wild

A difficult feature to build is getting low adoption rates and seems to be a low priority for users. Yet the product team chooses to continue prioritizing it because they've already invested so heavily in it.



4. Authority bias

Privileging the opinions or judgements of someone in a position of authority and giving them unmerited weight.

Bias in the wild

The CPO feels strongly that the product team should prioritize one proposed feature over another, and despite the PM being closest to the actual work with different feelings chooses to remain silent out of deference.

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Interested in learning more?

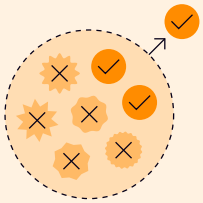
Check out the 4 ways to break free from cognitive bias here

5. Availability heuristic

Giving too much weight to information that's top of mind or easily accessible when making product decisions.

Bias in the wild

Product teams may rely too much on anecdotal info about a particular product or feature without examining a full data set related to it.

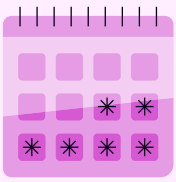


6. Survivorship bias

Conflating a successful subgroup in a given area with the entire group.

Bias in the wild

Product teams may think about, say, prioritizing a particular type of feature in terms of the one or two companies that have seen success with it, ignoring the 95% of companies who've failed to do it well.

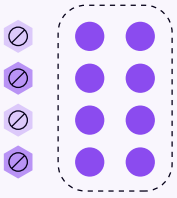


7. Recency bias

Privileging information that's the most recent (and thus often most top of mind) over potentially more relevant information that's somewhat older or less current.

Bias in the wild

If a feature has low adoption, but the period when one is measuring is generally one of lower usage (say, over the holidays), then one is forming a distorted picture of how customers are engaging with the product.

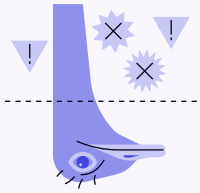


8. Bandwagon effect

Prioritizing a point of view or direction based on the number of people voicing support for it.

Bias in the wild

A PM holding a meeting doesn't understand that different team members prefer different ways of giving feedback. Some members feel pressure to support the view of the most vocal teammate present.

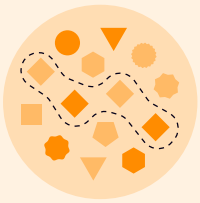


9. Ostrich effect

Choosing to ignore information that threatens our preferred way of doing things or point of view on a given question.

Bias in the wild

Signals come back that customers are dissatisfied with a key product element. Rather than act on the feedback, the team chooses to "stay positive" and focus only on positive feedback, leading to greater churn.



10. Clustering illusion

Spotting a pattern in the data where there is none.

Bias in the wild

Product teams may look at feedback or adoption over too limited a time horizon. They may start discerning "signals in the noise" where there aren't any.

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