

# Analysis of bazerman's 'blind spots' book



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In chapter one, Bazerman introduces the reader to the thought that people overestimate their ability to do the right thing, but in reality, they unintentionally act in an unethical manner. When we are confronted with ethical dilemmas, most people believe they would stand up for their moral beliefs. But as the chapter explains, we are not as ethical as we think because even though we like to think of ourselves as moral, or lawful, we all fall victim to bounded awareness and fail to utilize critical information that is relevant to situations. Bazerman shows us that we are quite capable of committing unethical acts such as cheating even though we believe we are doing the right thing. Unfortunately, when you combine bounded awareness of individuals with bounded ethicality, self-interest, the ethical gaps are exponential, especially with organizations. Bazerman writes, “[people] fail to realize that their training, incentives, and preferences prevent them from offering objective advice.” (Bazerman, Kindle location 386) Unfortunately, this partiality can have serious ramifications. Bazerman uses the Challenger explosion as an example to show the extreme consequences that can arise from organizational ethical gaps, like functional boundaries, to drive home the point. However, there is hope; people can overcome bounded awareness and ethicality by learning from their decisions made in the past.

In chapter two, Bazerman continues with the notion of alerting people to the gap that exist between our decisions and actions. He demonstrates this by explaining that even though ethicists tend to behave more morally than most, they are still human and therefore fall short in ethical behavior like all people. Therefore, just enrolling in ethics courses will not close the gap between our decisions and actions because normative philosophy is not

designed to recognize the unethical behavior “ that arises without intentionality,” (Bazerman 508) it only shows us how we should behave. For Bazerman, therein lies the problem, most people do not recognize an ethical dilemma because they do not have moral awareness or are quick to judge before reasoning. For example, in the recent news, a journalist, who happens to be gay said he is worried about Trump’s anti-gay legislation. When asked about what he thought Trump would do to harm the gay community, he said I don’t know. By judging without reason, this journalist could possibly use “ deliberate moral reasoning to justify his initial reaction,” (Bazerman 561) examples like this where people are quick to judge compromises our decision-making process.

When it comes to decision making, Bazerman explains that two distinct modes help people make ethical decisions: system 1 and system 2. In regards to system 1, this decision making is what people instinctually do without thinking about it, which is better known as “ gut instinct,” whereas system 2 uses rational thought and attention to detail to derive rational decision-making. By taking our time to process information, system 2 allows people to use self-control which in turn creates self-awareness. Additionally, when we are skeptical, it makes it possible to recognize missing information that leads to unethical behavior. Although system 1 is useful for thinking on our feet, it may not be the best method for ethical problems because they could contradict “ what we would have decided with more deliberation.” (Bazerman 614) Therefore, because our lives can cause ethical fading, to be most effective at decision making, we must combine both systems if we

want to close the gap between “ how we want to behave and how we actually behave.” (Bazerman 635)

In chapter 3, Bazerman shows the reader that unethical behavior is not an attribute of bad people, even when people have good intentions and do things to help a friend or colleague, it can lead to unintentional unethical behavior. This behavior is known as “ in-group favoritism” where people make decisions that are biased towards people who they associate with or are similar in nature. Unfortunately, this can be considered discrimination, especially when “ resources are scarce,” such as the case when multiple people are vying for one job like the Ashton Briggs situation. For me, this shows that even though most people do not discriminate intentionally, if you look deep enough you will find discrimination in everything because of our human nature, or as Bazerman writes, “ ordinary prejudice,” which can happen to anyone because of our implicit attitudes towards people. When individual implicit attitudes are combined, they can transform an organization into unethical practices, such as the University of Illinois. Unfortunately, ordinary prejudice will not go away unless there is a systemic change, which I don't see happening.

In order to change a system, you first must change the particular mindset of people and since most people are egocentric in some form, coming together to change implicit attitudes will be a difficult challenge. For example, the study done on the group of fisherman who had to decide what was fair proved that people will always put themselves first over others especially when there are limited resources. When you combine egocentrism and implicit attitudes you end up with unethical decisions because people will “

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alter the importance of attributes that affect what is fair.” (Bazerman 867)

Thus, people tend to overclaim resources even though they know that it will have severe consequences that overly discount the future of our children and the planet.

In chapter four, Bazerman introduces the reader to the errors that arise from behavioral forecasting. This forecasting error is what makes a decision about future scenarios inaccurate because they are based on erroneous information; typically, how we think we will act. When we think about our future behavior, it is easy to anticipate a situation we will face, however, what people fail to realize is the details of a situation determine actions, not the situation itself. Therefore, when you ask people how they will act in the future to ethical dilemmas they are responding based on the situation, however, when they are actually in that situation there are details that were never accounted for, like outside influences that cause people to act differently. Bazerman writes “ we think differently about a situation when we are predicting our behavior than when we are making an actual decision is that our motivations aren’t the same at these two points in time.” (Bazerman 1178) As human beings, it is not uncommon for us to systematically overestimate how we will or will not act in future situations. For example, in the military, you train 99% of your career so that you will be ready to respond to that 1% real life scenario. The reason for this is simple, no one knows how they will react in a combat situation until you are in a combat situation and bullets are coming back at you. By training 99% of the time, the goal is to strengthen your system 1 muscle memory. However, that is not always the case, and there are times when people underestimate just how

emotionally intense a situation might be, because of this, the first time the shooting starts, they freeze. Or in the case of the female students in the actual interview, they did not know how to handle the situation. However, behavioral ethics tells us that if the same students were ever put in a similar situation, they would more likely act like they had imagined they would because they learned from their past decisions. Therefore, this inability to accurately assess how people will act in future situations translates into behavioral miss-predictions and leads people to false illusions about their ethicality and decision-making process, which could eventually lead some people justifying unethical behavior.

In chapter five, Bazerman shows us how ethical fading prevents people from noticing unethical behavior in others. The reason for this is when people concentrate on work or other important tasks, they lose sight of what is happening around them and miss valuable information. For example, counting basketball passes causes people not to see the women walk by with an umbrella. When I was in the Navy going through flight physiology, we watched a similar video that had a gorilla instead of a woman. What this video is intended to teach is how tunnel vision can develop if we are not looking at all the information available to us and while in an airplane, it can be deadly. Such as the 1972 Eastern Airlines crash in the Florida Everglades. The flight crew became completely focused on a burned-out landing gear light that they lost sight of flying the plane. In regards to ethical decisions, people become so fixated with the information in front of them; they fail to see the dilemma and act unethically, such as the case of the Challenger explosion that resulted from Morton and NASA's motivated blindness.

Motivated blindness prevents people from seeing a situation for what it is because they have a biased view. For example, the Boston terrorist bombers. As society looked on with an unbiased view and said they were horrible men and deserved what they got. On the other hand, even with video footage of the one son throwing bombs out of the car window at the police, the mother said that there was no way her sons could have done those unethical acts. Additionally, people also suffer from indirect blindness. In this case, people only see what they want to see and disregard information that is not in their best interest. According to Bazerman, “members of organizations routinely delegate unethical behavior to others in their organizations,” such as the case with Jeffrey Skilling and Enron’s CFO Andrew Fastow who created fictitious companies to make money. Skilling authorized Fastow to make money, but claimed indirect blindness on how Fastow obtained the profits that led to the Enron scandal. Furthermore, the Enron scandal was not just about a company committing fraud, it also was about how people and industries failed to see the slippery slope of unethical accounting behavior that was taking place behind closed doors.

In chapter six, Bazerman reiterates that bounded ethicality and ethical fading prevents ethical decisions from transpiring regardless of ethical oaths and millions spent by companies on ethics training because they both assume that people know the rules and how to ensure compliance. Even though companies appear to have good intentions, the programs fail to identify the causes of unethical behavior, which stem from undue pressures that are placed on people from management to meet financial goals in a system that is designed to maximize profits. Unfortunately, if a company’s

goal is max profits, then this mindset trickles down through the ranks and requires employees to perform accordingly, which means people will identify behavior styles that are successful and most rewarding, even if the image and practice is unethical. In the movie, "Margin Calls," one of the young analyst had a one-dimensional goal, he only cared about finding out how his boss made over \$200k so he could do the same. Unfortunately, one-dimensional goals fail, like the analyst found out, because "one-dimensional goals cause individuals to be driven by an extrinsic motivation to comply rather than by an intrinsic motivation to do what's right." (Bazerman 1832)

Even though companies appear to do what is right, some would argue it is only a smoke screen to appease the public by discouraging unethical behavior, even though employees become intrigued by the discouragement, like the forbidden fruit. Additionally, when corporations have informal systems that teach employees how to deviate from the ethical standards, it leads to people testing the system to see what they can and cannot get away with. However, testing the waters is not just something employees do, Bazerman explains how corporations also try and see what they can and cannot get away with by using "innocuous language." Unfortunately, when corporations do so, they are sending the wrong message to their employees that says the company not only encourages unethical behavior, it accepts it as well.

In chapter seven, Bazerman uses ethical fading, bounded ethicality, and self-interest to show how they led to the corrupt policies of three of the largest industries in the US: Tobacco, Auditing, and Energy. In regards to the tobacco industry, ethical fading prevented the AMA from asking tough



questions and further researching the effects of smoking beyond the information the tobacco industry provided. By doing so, the AMAs lack of action epitomized bounded ethicality and treated the health problem as a management or business issue instead of an ethical issue. Additionally, the tobacco industry added to the smoke and mirror effect by “ lobbying Congress and supplying misinformation to the public,” (Bazerman 2282) and paying doctors who were smokers to present biased information and findings in favor of the companies by saying there was no conclusive proof that smoking causes cancer. By doing so, society was sold out by the very organization that was entrusted to protect our health. Additionally, you can see the same trends in the Energy industry, especially the oil companies like Exxon who were once the tip of the spear for debunking the effects of climate change. When companies purposely deceive the public to ensure their profits, such as paying for scientific research that is specifically designed to counter climate change data, they intentionally undermined the public’s trust. Furthermore, this undermining is also evident with the politicians who say anything to get elected and do anything to stay in office. Because of this, politicians will vote against any policy that could jeopardize their seat with the constituents while helping the high paying donors in the oil industry. By doing so, their entire political career is based on Bazerman’s reward system. However, to place this corruption solely at the feet of companies would be unethical. Society is also to blame because when it comes to electing these officials, voters must employ the same set of organizational rewards system because no candidate represents every possible concern people have. Because of this, voters must also give and take based on issues just like politicians. Therefore, Bazerman hit the nail on

the head when he said: “ the failure to respond effectively to climate change can be viewed as a massive pattern of unethical behavior committed not only by our elected officials but by us ordinary citizens.” (Bazerman 2467)

As for the auditing industry, the SEC pushed for a policy known as auditor independence which would give investors some peace of mind that that they could trust the financial information being reported by companies. By doing so, it would prevent unethical behavior from occurring, such as Price Waterhouse who invested in a client’s business. It is this type of motivated blindness that leads to corruption in any industry that the SEC was trying to prevent. Instead, the lobbyist self-interest won over Congress because capitol hill was more worried about being reelected than the constituent’s well-being.

In chapter eight, Bazerman discusses how people must make a concerted effort to change how we make ethical decisions and for this to happen we must first realize how susceptible we are to our unconscious biases. To do this, we must find ways to tame our “ want” self so that we can make sound decisions. By giving ourselves the ability to evaluate multiple options we are giving our “ should” self a fighting chance. For this to happen, we must first think about a situation before acting. When people train for situations, you are better prepared for the “ hidden psychological forces” (Murphy’s Law) that always seem to rear their ugly head with ethical dilemmas. To help better prepare yourself, you need to think about the different motivations that can impede decision making. Those that prepare ahead of time for anything have a better chance of being successful than the ones that do not. For example, people study for months before the GMAT or GRE so that they

can score well. Additionally, people prepare (they should) for interviews by researching the company as well as preparing for the dreaded “ what is your weakness” question. According to Bazerman, there is no difference between preparing for a test or interview and preparing for the decision-making process. By doing so, people increase their “ accuracy in the planning stage of decision making. and arm [themselves] with accurate information about [their] most likely response.” (Bazerman 2641) Additionally, preparing for and then acting that way during situations is not enough. To ensure that we did in fact act how we practiced, we need to accurately evaluate our performance immediately so that the events are fresh in our mind. By doing so, you will be able to “ describe how [the] bias might affect your recollection of the decision.” (Bazerman 2696) Only when we make a conscious effort to identify situations that could prevent us from acting in an ethical manner will we become the ethical person we want to be.

After reading the book “ Blind Spots,” I felt there was a strong correlation with the movie “ Enron,” because there were quite a few people who fell into unethical intentionality, such as Jeffrey Skilling and Andrew Fastow, as well as some who belong with unethical unintentionality, such as the people like Sherron Watkins, the Enron vice president. Additionally, there were others that fell victim to bounded ethicality and allowed their preferences and biases to affect how they viewed ethical dilemmas such as the traders.

In summary, I found it to be quite informative because it brought to light how people’s busy life easily affects their ethical decision-making process and prevent them from noticing the sinkholes that ethical fading causes in ourselves and organizations. Because of this, it is not uncommon for us to

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systematically overestimate how we will or will not act in future situations because of behavior forecasting errors. Especially when you consider how biased people's implicit attitudes are towards people, which causes them to reconstruct information to make their actions appear ethical. Furthermore, people's self-interest can cause them to tilt the scales of fairness in their favor because of their egocentric nature that leads to overclaiming resources which overly discounts the future of the environment and society. Only when people realize just how susceptible we are to unethical behavior will we be able to bridge the gap between who we are and who we want to be.

## **Work Cited**

Bazerman, Max H.; Tenbrunsel, Ann E. *Blind Spots: Why We Fail to Do What's Right and What to Do about It (Kindle)* . Princeton University Press. Kindle Edition.