

## Notes on Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Doubleday Canada, 2011)

This book emphasizes that bias is in many (even most) cases not intentional, but is a result of learned cognitive patterns. Kahneman identifies the ways in which we make thinking errors and seeks ways to avoid those errors. He identifies “fast”(relatively automatic) and “slow” thinking processes (more laborious). The fast processes have been trained by our prior experiences and we use them without applying conscious judgment—they are therefore especially prone to bias. The more we use the “slow” kind of processing, the more we are able to take steps to avoid biased thinking.

Examples of “fast” thinking include:

- priming effects: being exposed to an idea can make us unthinkingly behave a certain way, as when people primed to think about money are unconsciously less generous (52-58)
- ideas that are familiar or easier to understand tend to feel true, good, familiar, or effortless (59-70)
- we quickly turn experiences from the past into norms (71-78)
- confirmation bias: we attend to confirming rather than disproving evidence (79-81)
- halo effect: having observed some positive traits, we assume the traits not observed are also positive (82-85)
- “what you see is all there is”: what we don't know doesn't exist for us (85-88)
- we use heuristics (e.g. whether someone interviews well) to replace evidence (e.g. whether that person can do the job) (97-104, 129-136)

Kahneman suggests that using specific criteria strictly (as with a scoring rubric that organizes observations) can cut down on biased decision-making (225). This is difficult, in part because we trust our intuition more than any rubric or set of criteria, but it has been demonstrated to reduce bias (227-233). The criteria must be defined and recorded first, and only then applied to the materials being judged. Kahneman also suggests having committee members record impressions before the committee discusses those impressions, to reduce halo effects (84-85).

“Suppose that you need to hire a sales representative for your firm. If you are serious about hiring the best possible person for the job, this is what you should do. First, select a few traits that are prerequisites for success in this position (technical proficiency, engaging personality, reliability, and so on). Don't overdo it—six dimensions is a good number. The traits you choose should be as independent as possible from each other, and you should feel that you can assess them reliably by asking a few factual questions. Next, make a list of those questions for each trait and think about how you will score it, say on a 1-5 scale. You should have an idea of what you will call ‘very weak’ or ‘very strong.’ ... To avoid halo effects, you must collect the information on one trait at a time, scoring each before you move on to the next one. Do not skip around. To evaluate each candidate, add up the six scores. ... you are much more likely to find the best candidate if you use this procedure than if you do what people normally do in such situations, which is to go into the interview unprepared and to make choices by an overall intuitive judgment...” (232).

Program and Award Committees have historically not defined their criteria this specifically, but doing so may be helpful if we aim for inclusivity. Committee members would probably like to retain the freedom to define excellence; if the criteria are stable from year to year, however, we could choose to make them part of the award descriptions and the Program Committee's Call for Proposals to increase the transparency of the process.

A revised committee process might look like this:

Before reading any proposals or award materials, the committee meets by teleconference to establish a list of six specific criteria that will be applied in their work, and agrees on how to apply a scale of 1 to 5 points for each of these criteria.

Committee members then apply the agreed-upon criteria as they evaluate the submitted materials. The committee members submit their scores for the six criteria and their total scores in an Excel spreadsheet to the committee chair, who aggregates the scores into a ranked list. As the committee examines the results, there might be further discussion about differences in ratings or how the criteria were applied, but committee members should be aware that deviating from their criteria or making more intuitive judgments of excellence is likely to introduce bias.