

## Five Ways to Mistake-Proof Your Thinking

People make mistakes all the time, sometimes even without knowing they're wrong. It may take years to discover the error of your ways. Most recently, popular writer Malcolm Gladwell admitted that he was wrong to promote the "broken windows" theory of policing in his 2000 book, *The Tipping Point*: "Yeah, it's just like: 'I was wrong. Here's how badly I was wrong. Here's why I was wrong.'" He should, he notes, held his ideas "more loosely."

Sometimes when you're wrong, the consequences hardly matter at all. You didn't think it would rain, but it did, and you forgot your umbrella. In Gladwell's case, though, there were consequences given how the book took the media and popular imagination by storm. How can mistakes, large and small, be detected in the first place?

According to Palm Beach Atlantic University's Garrett Lee Cohee and Cora Barnhart, when leaders make decisions, the consequences actually can be wide-ranging. The failure by leaders "can lead to devastating results," such as firing the wrong person, backing a cause that fails, or—like Gladwell—supporting an idea that later is shown to be false.

Turning to the cognitive and social cognitive literature, Cohee and Barnhart sort the reasons for faulty judgments into five big buckets. Their article focuses on public decisions with devastating consequences. While a leader may be more likely to be condemned to bad thinking by hubris, or an inability to see oneself as a mere mortal, anyone can make these mistakes, as is attested to by study after study in the psychological literature. Each type of mistake can be a problem in and of itself, but when they multiply, their dangers increase exponentially.

### 1. Attributional bias

The mistake here is to come up with an explanation ("attribution") for an outcome that does not fit with the facts.

### 2. Ignoring the role of randomness

Sometimes there is no explanation for a favorable outcome. It happens for reasons outside anyone's control.

### 3. Unskilled and unaware of it

This "disconcerting" cognitive bias leads the incompetent to think they're skilled and the competent to downplay their own abilities.

### 4. Memory bias and unreliability

There is a vast research tradition demonstrating people's tendency to sway memory in the direction of false recollections, often seeing themselves in a more favorable light than is warranted.

#### 5. Jumping to conclusions we want to conclude

What's known as "fast thinking" leads people to slide as quickly as they can over details when making decisions, particularly when under pressure.

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