

From another angle?

by BRIAN LOCKHART

There is a famous study from the Second World War that is used in some places to show why looking at a problem from a different angle will sometimes provide the solution.

That study may also provide answers to some modern problems when examined from a different viewpoint.

During the war, the Allied Bomber Command began a study to determine where their aircraft were most vulnerable to attack and damage from enemy planes.

When a bomber returned from a mission, they noted all the bullet strikes and made a record of them.

After putting a lot of data together, they mapped out the most likely places an aircraft would receive bullet hits.

The wing tips and fuselage had the most damage so they started a new plan of placing more armour on those parts of the aircraft to protect it and the crew from enemy bullets.

It seemed to make sense ? at first.

However, one man involved in the program examined the situation and had a startling revelation about the facts in the study.

He noted that they were studying only the aircraft that had returned safely, although damaged from a mission, while ignoring the bombers that had been lost.

He reasoned that if an aircraft was shot down, it was those aircraft that should be studied, not the ones that had returned.

He was right. They realized that the blank spots on their aircraft damage reports that showed no bullet strikes, would indicate the places that an aircraft that had been shot down had received enough damage to drop it from the sky.

They quickly reversed their way of thinking and started placing the extra armour on those areas that showed no bullet strikes on returning aircraft.

This way of thinking has since been referred to as 'survivorship bias.' It is the error of concentrating on the people or things that made it past some selection process while overlooking those that did not.

A typical example may be when examining school grades. If a number of students presented their high school grades to a university during the admission process, and three out of five of those students with exceptional grades came from the same high school, the thought may be that the high school provides some kind of superior education.

However, when you look at it from a different angle, it turns out it just happens to be a much larger high school than the others so the odds of having more students with good grades is higher.

This way of looking at things from a different angle may explain a lot of things about modern society and why some things may seem more prevalent than they used to be.

I recall being in a museum on a school trip and the teacher pointing out a mannequin wearing a suit from the late 1800s. The teacher noted how small the suit was and told us that people were a lot shorter back then.

Well, there may be some truth to that, as the average height at that time was slightly shorter than today, however there were a lot of cowboys well over six feet tall who would have been considered giants at the time if the average height was only 5' 2". But history does not note people over six feet tall being unusually large.

I did some research with a museum on this topic. It turns out that many items of clothing in museums are of a small size ? not because everyone at the time were short by today's standards ? but because the clothes worn by average sized people would have been purchased, worn, then finally discarded, while smaller sizes just happened to be less saleable, left over, and made their way to museum collections.

If you look at the museum clothing with just one view, it seems people were all very short ? but when you look at it from a different angle, things are really much different.

This way of thinking may provide a clue as to why some things seem to be more prevalent than they were in the past.

If you've ever wondered why some things seem to occur more now, than they did in the past, it might be that the way of diagnosing problems and issues has taken a different angle of approach and made them more identifiable than they once were.

It's an interesting way of thinking but it might solve a lot of problems or at least broaden the spectrum of how we view the world.