



NAVIGATING EDDIES

According to the Oxford dictionary, eddies are “circular movements of water which run counter to the main current causing a small whirlpool.” According to my river guide friends, there is just no end to the way eddies trap or suck you in.

In my work as a Leadership Coach, I have noticed that we all get caught in eddies – “listening eddies” is what I call them. Here’s what it looks like:

A habitual loop with a storyline, beliefs or behaviors that have become so embedded, it leaves little room for any other perspective – and where thoughtful, curious listening is no longer happening!

Instead, what we hear is our own strong voice in our head running a counter narrative to what we are hearing from the other person. And because we are listening to our own voice there is little to no room left to listen to another.

What if we could identify our eddies and avoid getting sucked in and trapped? We can do this when we begin to challenge our mental filters or biases. And we all have biases or filters which interfere with our ability to listen. In fact, if you have a brain, you have bias! These biases are our brain’s shortcut to help us process complex information quickly – but also lead to faulty reasoning.

There are lots and lots of cognitive biases but notice how the following three biases become listening pitfalls – and eddies:

- **Confirmation bias:** We only see what we want to see and ignore any evidence to the contrary. Here’s how it sounds inside your head, “I don’t believe a word he is saying. I have facts that completely contradict his argument.”
- **Assessment bias:** We make decisions on already formed ideas, leaving no room for differences. Here’s how it sounds, “I agree.” “I don’t agree.” “That’s not true.”
- **Action bias:** Our tendency to favor action or inaction – no matter what. Here’s how it sounds from the voice in your head. “This is taking so long. I know what to do, so let’s get on with it!”

Next time you are stuck in a listening eddy, try using these questions to interrogate your reasoning:

- Is what I am believing even true?
- What is the evidence to suggest it is true?
- What are they seeing, feeling, and understanding that I do not?
- What are their hopes, beliefs, and fears underneath the surface that would help me understand them better?
- What is valuable in their perspective that I need to hear?

Nobel Prize winning physicist, Arno Penzias when asked about what had contributed to his success replied, “the first thing I do every morning is ask myself, “why do I strongly believe what I believe?” He then said, “it is critical to constantly question your own assumptions.”

Questioning your assumptions will help you to navigate through eddies so you can become a more curious and open listener.