

Better than average



In a number of studies around the world it has been found that about 80% of people consider their own driving to be “better than average”. One simple view is that there is a kind of “illusory superiority” at work, that is, people tend to overestimate their own positive qualities and underestimate their negative ones and hence are both blind to their own shortcomings and acutely conscious of those exhibited by others. I suspect, however, that the real situation is a bit more interesting.

Suppose there were, say, three distinct ways to measure the quality of driving, let’s say the average speed (without accidents or tickets), the number of “near accidents” each week and the gas mileage achieved. The thing is that these type of metrics often conflict with each other, as one gets better the others usually gets worse. If someone felt that, for example, maximising gas mileage was the sole “most crucial” aspect of driving they would focus exclusively on

that, they would do things to ensure the best possible mileage even if that meant a slower journey or slightly increased risk of incidents. In this person’s view anyone who ignored the efficiency of their driving would be, by definition, a “bad driver”. If the world were evenly split into three types of drivers, each with a distinct way to assess “driving goodness” then it would be quite possible for every single driver to consider their own performance to be better than 66% of the other drivers, and, within the context of their own metrics, for them all to be entirely correct.

Of course this interaction between how things are measured and its “overall impression” can go the other way as well. I suspect that if you were to ask active data managers how well data was handled then 80% would think that their own organisation was “below average”. In this case not because they fail to achieve the important goals, but rather because users focus on the goals they have (so far) failed to achieve. For example, users will stridently discuss the completion diagrams that they cannot find only as long as they can’t find them, as soon as they are indexed, organised and easy to obtain they will no longer be the topic that everyone asks about. Of course, if we are not careful, this negative impression can lead on to serious issues, if senior executives feel that however much they pump into improving data handling the problems never go away then they will soon start to look for ways to cut down this unproductive expenditure. The best way to avoid this is to always have a comprehensive list of the improvements that users have asked for and received, so that evidence for the value we create is always close to hand. This also means that we have to take every chance to boast. The best managed groups have to continually articulate the financial benefits that they have delivered, they must keep reminding people that last year’s challenges were successfully overcome and that tomorrow’s opportunities are only possible because they build on the solid foundation that previous investment has built. It’s hard to keep bragging about our own successes, but if we don’t know one else will.