

Persuasion IQ Newsletter

[Click Here to Subscribe](#)

THE WOBEGON EFFECT

The Science of Cognitive Bias

BETTER-THAN-AVERAGE EFFECT

Radio humorist Garrison Keillor coined the term "Lake Wobegon Effect" to describe the tendency most people have to see themselves as better than average. In his book, *Lake Wobegon Days*, Keillor depicts a town where "all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average."¹ Like the Lake Wobegon folks, we all have a natural bias to see ourselves as above average. It's really hard to admit it when we just don't cut it, especially when it comes to skills that we regard as basic or common. Psychologists call this tendency "cognitive bias," or the "better-than-average effect." It is also called "The Wobegon Effect."

When I teach persuasion, negotiation, or mastery seminars, sometimes I ask my students to list the top ten reasons why they are not more successful. They find plenty of reasons for their lack of success, but the notion that their own shortcomings could somehow be responsible hardly ever makes it onto their radar screen. We always feel we must gloss over our weaknesses to make things seem better than they really are. We lie about our incomes, our ages, our weights. The reason the Wobegon Effect has such a negative

A hyena cannot smell its own stench.
—AFRICAN PROVERB

impact, not only on our persuasive abilities but also in our lives, is because we are lying to ourselves. That's the bottom line. We're lying to others, and we're lying to ourselves. We are investing in hopes and dreams that are not based on honest evaluation. It might seem nice to view the world through rose-colored glasses for a while, but in the end, you're setting yourself up for failure. The Wobegon Effect ultimately gives us a false sense of security. When afflicted by it, we become numb to reality and fail to see exactly where we stand and what we need to improve. This tendency can lower our expectations about ourselves and falsely improve our confidence.

I'm not recommending a doom-and-gloom attitude, but how can you expect to set goals—modest or lofty—if they are all built on false skills and presumptions? Great persuaders are able to take a good, hard look at themselves and come to grips with the facts, both the good and the bad. This is when you will be able to make real progress.

THE WOBEGON EFFECT

The Science of Cognitive Bias

WHAT IS YOUR PERSONAL WOBEGON?

The Wobegon Effect manifests itself when we are evaluating a skill or talent that we expect ourselves to have or when others expect us to have a particular skill. When social pressure or social validation is involved, we make higher-than-expected evaluations. For example, if you were in sales and you were asked to rate your ability to connect with people or your product knowledge, you would be 90 percent likely to rate yourself above average, even though mathematically the validity of your assertion would be less than 50 percent. Among managers, 90 percent will rate themselves better than the average manager. We tend to overestimate everything from grades and physical appearance to the possibility of divorce.

To drive home the Wobegon Effect's prevalence, one study found that most people believe they are more _____ than the average person.

- Athletic
- Intelligent
- Organized
- Ethical
- Logical
- Interesting
- Fair-minded
- Attractive

Things change, however, when people start evaluating themselves with respect to skills that are not part of their everyday world. Individuals tend to rate themselves below average in such areas as acting, mechanics, juggling, nuclear fusion, or computer programming—things our employer or society at large does not expect us to know and understand.

My research has shown the following to be the top five strengths persuasion students say they have mastered, but rate themselves higher than they actually are:

- People skills/empathy
- Persistence/determination
- Communication/listening
- Personal mastery
- Closing skills

Do you suffer from the Wobegon Effect? What is it that you've been telling yourself and everyone else you do really well, when in fact you don't do it well at all—or at least you're not above average, as you've been trying to convince yourself and everyone else? Did you accept your [Persuasion IQ test](#) results or did you rationalize why they were not higher? Where do your talents and traits compare to the real world?