Agile Coach Anti-Bias Playbook

Each section includes:

Why it happens – Root causes in agile coaching

How to recognize it – What it looks and sounds like

How to avoid it – Practical ways to counter it

Powerful questions – Coaching questions to open awareness and change

1. Fundamental Attribution Error

Why it happens: It's easy to explain problems by blaming individuals instead of looking at the system.

How to recognize it: You hear "they're resistant" or "this team just doesn't get agile."

How to avoid it: Look for system factors such as structures, incentives, and leadership behavior. Ask "what" instead of "who."

Powerful questions:
- What in the system might be driving that behavior?
- If everyone's doing their best, what's getting in their way?
- How have our structures or incentives shaped this outcome?
- What could we change in the environment to make this behavior unnecessary?

2. Optimism Bias and Catastrophizing

Why it happens: Strong emotional attachment to outcomes makes us swing between overconfidence and hopelessness.

How to recognize it: You hear "this will be easy" or "we'll never succeed here."

How to avoid it: Anchor in evidence. Run short experiments. Track learning instead of success or failure.

Powerful questions:
- What evidence supports this belief?
- What's the smallest safe-to-try experiment we can run?
- If this goes better or worse than expected, how will we adapt?
- What early signals would show us we're off track?

3. Availability, Anchoring, and Recency Bias

Why it happens: We rely too much on the most visible or recent information.

How to recognize it: Strong conclusions are drawn after one conversation or one sprint.

How to avoid it: Collect data over time. Seek several perspectives. Review older information regularly.

Powerful questions:
- What information might we be missing?
- How might first impressions be shaping our view?
- What would an outsider notice that we don't?
- Would our conclusion be the same if we reviewed earlier data?

4. Sunk Cost Fallacy

Why it happens: Once effort and emotion are invested, it feels wrong to stop.

How to recognize it: You hear " we' ve come too far to quit now."

How to avoid it: Define exit or pivot criteria before starting. Consider opportunity cost. Reframe stopping as learning.

Powerful questions:
- If we started fresh today, would we still choose this path?
- What are we afraid of losing if we stop?
- What future value are we giving up by continuing?
- How can we capture the learning before moving on?

5. Black-and-White Thinking

Why it happens: Binary thinking feels safe because it reduces complexity.

How to recognize it: You hear " that' s not agile" or " you' re doing it wrong."

How to avoid it: Separate principles from practices. Encourage " both-and" conversations.

Powerful questions:
- What shades of grey exist here?
- What' s working and not working at the same time?
- What assumptions define right and wrong for us?
- Where might flexibility serve us better than purity?

6. Groupthink

Why it happens: People want harmony and avoid the discomfort of dissent.

How to recognize it: You see fast consensus, silence, or lack of challenge.

How to avoid it: Collect ideas anonymously. Rotate a devil's advocate role. Reward constructive disagreement.

Powerful questions:

- Whose voice haven't we heard yet?
- What risks are we ignoring because we all seem to agree?
- What would a dissenting opinion sound like?
- Who can help us challenge our assumptions?

7. False Consensus Effect

Why it happens: We assume others share our beliefs and enthusiasm.

How to recognize it: You think there's alignment until resistance appears.

How to avoid it: Use interviews or surveys to test readiness. Make dissent visible. Check for genuine agreement.

Powerful questions:
- What concerns might others have that we're not naming?
- If we asked a random person, what would they say?
- What signals might show misalignment?
- How can we check if agreement is genuine?

8. Authority Bias

Why it happens: People give extra weight to leaders' opinions, and hierarchy discourages challenge.

How to recognize it: Ideas from leaders are accepted instantly, and dissent fades quickly.

How to avoid it: Collect ideas anonymously before leaders speak. Use consent or advice processes.

Powerful questions:
- If this idea came from someone else, how would we treat it?
- What perspectives haven't had equal airtime?
- What would we do if rank didn't matter?
- What's the cost of not questioning this decision?

9. Confirmation Bias

Why it happens: We pay attention to data that fits our beliefs and ignore the rest.

How to recognize it: You defend your preferred framework or conclusion despite conflicting evidence.

How to avoid it: Actively seek data that disproves your view. Pair with another coach to get external reflection.

Powerful questions:
- What evidence would prove me wrong?
- What data have I ignored because it doesn't fit my story?
- Who sees this differently, and what can I learn from them?
- If I were coaching someone else, what bias would I notice?

10. Halo Effect

Why it happens: A single positive trait distorts our whole assessment of someone.

How to recognize it: You rate someone highly based on reputation or charisma rather than behavior.

How to avoid it: Use multiple criteria for feedback. Gather peer input. Observe people in different settings.

Powerful questions:
- What feedback might this person never hear because we admire them?
- Where might their strength create blind spots?
- How can we test our assumptions about their capability?
- What evidence supports our judgment across situations?

11. Dunning-Kruger and the Impostor Effect

Why it happens: Inaccurate self-awareness leads novices to overrate themselves and experts to underrate themselves.

How to recognize it: Overconfidence ("I know exactly what to do") or paralysis ("I'm not good enough").

How to avoid it: Seek regular feedback. Pair with peers at different levels. Reflect on growth instead of perfection.

Powerful questions:
- What is my confidence based on?
- Where could feedback sharpen my perspective?
- What experiment would stretch my comfort zone?
- What would I do if I trusted my competence enough to try?

12. Cognitive Dissonance

Why it happens: We hold conflicting beliefs, such as valuing autonomy but acting with control.

How to recognize it: Under pressure, your behavior contradicts your stated agile values.

How to avoid it: Surface contradictions directly. Revisit personal values and coaching stance.

Powerful questions:
- Where do my actions not match my stated values?
- What fear drives me to control instead of trust?
- How would I act if I fully embodied agile principles?
- What story do I tell myself to justify this contradiction?