Flipping the Bozo Bit

Flipping the bozo bit on someone is a mental trap/antipattern/shortcut whereby we assume the person is a bozo. This could mean that you assume all of their opinions are useless going forward and/or that you treat them like an idiot.

This is an expression I first encountered on Scott Hanselman's Hanselminutes podcast episode with Kris Nova in which they discuss fostering an atmosphere of psychological safety at work. Hanselman and Nova give the example of "there's no such thing as a stupid question" as a place where one might fall into this trap. You should assume that people don't know stuff that might seem obvious to you and that that's ok. We can't know everything. Preventing people from asking stupid questions can result in them having imposter syndrome.

There is an extensive page on this phenomenon over at the c2 wiki which suggests that the usage of the term bozo bit in this context was originally coined by Jim McCarthy in Dynamics of Software Development. It is thought to originate from a copy protection system in early macOS.

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