

[**BIAS INTERRUPTERS**] *small steps big change*

INTERRUPTING BIAS IN PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS

Tools for Organizations

Incremental steps that improve diversity in your organization can yield large gains. Diverse work groups perform better and are more committed, innovative and loyal.¹ Gender diverse workgroups have better collective intelligence, which improves performance by the group and its members, leading to better financial performance.² Racially diverse workgroups consider a broader range of alternatives, make better decisions, and are better at solving problems.³ Bias, if unchecked, affects many different groups: modest or introverted men, LGBT+ people, individuals with disabilities, class migrants (professionals from blue-collar backgrounds), women, and people of color. We've distilled the huge literature on bias into simple steps that help you and your company perform better.

Bias interrupters are small adjustments to your existing systems. They should not require you to abandon systems currently in place.

THE CHALLENGE

A recent study of performance evaluations in tech found that 66% of women's performance reviews contained negative personality criticism ("You come off as abrasive") whereas only 1% of men's reviews did.⁴ We know now that workplaces that view themselves as being highly meritocratic often are, in fact, *more* biased than other organizations⁵ the usual responses—one-shot diversity trainings, mentoring and networking programs—typically don't work.⁶

THE SOLUTION: A 3 Step Approach

Bias interrupters are tweaks to basic business systems that can yield large gains for your business, using a 3 step process:

1) Use metrics: Businesses use metrics to assess whether they have progressed towards any strategic goal. Metrics can help you pinpoint where bias exists, and assess the effectiveness of the measures you've taken. (Whether metrics are made public will vary from company to company, and from metric to metric.)

2) Implement a Bias Interrupter: For example, use a bounceback: When a supervisor's performance ratings go askew for certain groups, ask them to re-look at their reviews to determine whether they have a disproportionate number of poor performers or if unconscious bias may have seeped in. One organization that did this found that over time, supervisors' ratings of underrepresented groups converged with those of majority men.

3) Repeat as needed. After you implement bias interrupters, return to your key metrics: did it produce any change? If not, you may need to implement stronger Interrupters, or you maybe targeting the wrong place in the performance evaluation process. Use an iterative process until your metrics improve.

¹ e.g., Dahlin et al., 2005; Ely & Thomas, 2001; Jehn et al., 1999

² Richard et al., 2004, Wooley et al, 2011; Lewis, 2016

³ Phillips et al., 2006, Antonio et al., 2004; Richard et al., 2003

⁴ Snyder, 2014

⁵ Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006

⁶ Castilla, 2015

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1. Use Metrics

Data and metrics help you spot problems—and assess the effectiveness of the measures you’ve taken. Businesses use metrics to help them achieve any strategic goal. Key metrics:

- Do your performance evaluations show consistently higher ratings for majority men than for women, people of color, or other relevant groups?
- Do women’s ratings fall after they have children? Do employees’ ratings fall after they take parental leave or adopt flexible work arrangements?
- Do the same performance ratings result in different promotion or compensation rates for different groups?

Keep metrics by: 1) any individual supervisor; 2) a department; and 3) the organization as a whole.

2. Implement Bias Interrupters

All bias interrupters should apply both to written evaluations and in meetings, where relevant. Because every organization is different, not all interrupters will be relevant. Consider this a menu.

To understand the research and rationale behind the suggested bias interrupters, read our **Identifying Bias in Performance Evaluations Worksheet (2-page version or with citations)** which summarizes hundreds of studies.

- **Empower people** involved in the evaluation process to spot and interrupt bias by reading our **Identifying Bias in Performance Evaluations Worksheet**. Read and distribute the **Worksheet** to help you understand the rationale behind the steps suggested below.
- **Appoint Bias Interrupters.**
- Have team members or HR business partners who have been trained to spot bias involved at every step of the evaluation process.
- **Begin with clear and specific performance criteria** directly related to job requirements.
 - Try: “He is able to write an effective summary judgement motion under strict deadlines,” instead of: “He writes well.”
- **Require evidence from the evaluation period that justifies the rating.**
 - Try: “In March, she gave X presentation in front of Y client on Z project, answered his questions effectively, and was successful in making the sale,” instead of: “She’s quick on her feet.”
- **Consider performance and potential separately** for each candidate.
 - Performance and potential should be appraised separately, given the tendency for majority men to be judged on potential; others on performance.
- **Separate personality issues from skill sets** for each candidate.
 - Personal style should be appraised separately from skills, because a narrower range of behavior often is accepted from women and people of color. For example, women may be labeled

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“difficult” for doing things that are accepted in majority men.

- **Level the playing field** by ensuring everyone knows how to promote themselves effectively and sending the message they are expected to do so. Distribute our **Writing an Effective Self-Evaluation Worksheet**, which can help.
- **Offer alternatives to self-promotion.**
 - Encourage or require managers to set up more formal systems for sharing successes, such as a monthly email that lists employees’ accomplishments.
- **Provide a bounceback.**
 - Managers whose performance evaluations show persistent bias should receive a bounceback (i.e. someone should talk through the evidence with them).
- **Have Bias Interrupters play an active role in calibration meetings.**
 - In many organizations, managers meet to produce a target distribution of ratings or cross-calibrate rankings. Have managers read our **Identifying Bias in Performance Evaluations Worksheet** of bias before they meet. Have a trained Bias Interrupter in the room.
- **Don’t eliminate your performance appraisal system.**
 - Eliminating formal performance evaluation systems and replacing them with feedback-on-the-fly creates conditions for bias to flourish.

What’s a bounceback?

An example: in one organization, when a supervisor’s ratings of an underrepresented group deviate dramatically from the mean, the evaluations are returned to the supervisor with the message: either you have an undiagnosed performance problem that requires a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP), or you need to take another look at your evaluations as a group. The organization found that a few people were put on PIPs—but that over time supervisors’ ratings of underrepresented groups converged with those of majority men. The organization that used this found that all groups thought the performance evaluations were equally fair.

3. Repeat as needed

- **Return to your key metrics.** Did the bias interrupters produce any change?
- **If you don’t see change,** you may need to implement a stronger bias interrupter, or you may be targeting the wrong place in the performance evaluation process.
- **Use an iterative process** until your metrics improve.