

# [ BIAS INTERRUPTERS ] *small steps big change*

## BIAS INTERRUPTERS FOR MANAGERS *Tools for Performance Evaluations*

### THE CHALLENGE

A study of performance evaluations in tech found that 66% of women's performance reviews contained at least one negative personality criticism ("You come off as abrasive") whereas only 1% of men's reviews did.<sup>1</sup> In our performance evaluation audit at a law firm, we found that people of color and white women were far more likely to have their personality mentioned in their evaluations (including negative personality traits). What's optional for white men (getting along with others), appears to be necessary for white women and people of color. Case in point: 83% of Black men were praised for having a "good attitude" vs. 46% of white men, and 27% of white women were praised for being "friendly and warm" vs. 10% of white men.<sup>2</sup>

Research also shows that white men tend to be judged on their *potential* while "prove-it-again groups" (women, people of color, individuals with disabilities,<sup>3</sup> members of the LGBTQIA+ community,<sup>4</sup> older employees,<sup>5</sup> and first-generation professionals) are judged (or scrutinized) on their *performance*. Small biases can have large effects: According to one study, women received significantly lower "potential" ratings despite higher job performance ratings and this accounted for 30-50% of the gender promotion gap.<sup>6</sup>

### **New Systems Benefit Everyone**

In one Bias Interrupters experiment, described in a [\*Harvard Business Review\* article](#), we sharply decreased documented forms of racial and gender bias in performance evaluations at a law firm. In year one, our analysis found that only 9.5% of people of color had leadership mentioned in their performance evaluations – over 70 percentage points lower than white women. In year two, we used two simple Bias Interrupters: we redesigned the performance evaluation form to require evidence to justify competency ratings and helped the organization design a one-hour workshop on how to interrupt bias in performance evaluations. The results were dramatic. In year two, 100% of people of color had leadership mentioned – and evaluations that mentioned leadership skills had higher ratings. And constructive feedback increased for employees of *all* demographic groups which highlights an extremely important point: using an evidence-based performance evaluation system benefits everyone.

### THE SOLUTION

Bias interrupters are tweaks to basic business systems that can yield large gains: organizational interrupters change existing business systems; individual interrupters are steps individuals can take on their own.

#### **1. Consider the Metrics**

Here are some things to keep an eye out for:

- Do your performance evaluations show consistently higher ratings for majority men than for women, people of color, or other relevant groups?
- Do your performance evaluations show consistently higher ratings for in-person workers than remote and hybrid workers?
- 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?

## 2. Implement Bias Interrupters

- **Start separating personality issues from skill sets for each candidate. Remember** the study that found 66% of women's performance reviews contained negative personality criticism, but only 1% of men's reviews did?<sup>7</sup> Not acceptable. 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 "difficult" for doing things that are accepted in majority men.<sup>8</sup>
- **Level the playing field with respect to self-promotion** by ensuring everyone knows they're expected to do so and that they know how. Distribute our Writing an Effective Self-Evaluation Guide to help. Some groups, notably women, people of Asian descent, and first-generation professionals may be reluctant to self-promote.<sup>9</sup> By equipping all employees with this worksheet, modest and introverted people can benefit as well.
- **Don't accept global ratings without back-up.** 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." In the performance evaluation experiment at the law firm (described above), we redesigned the form to focus on specific competencies that mattered to the organization and required that evaluators list 3 pieces of evidence to accompany every numerical rating. Doing so minimized the "halo-horns effect:" where white men are artificially advantaged by global ratings because they get halos (one strength is generalized into an overall high rating) whereas other groups get horns (one mistake is generalized into an overall low rating).<sup>10</sup>
- **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.<sup>11</sup>
- **Combat in-person favoritism.** With more companies transitioning to hybrid models of work, it is important to ensure that "face-time" in the office doesn't translate to higher ratings on performance evaluations, quicker promotions, and larger compensation.<sup>12</sup> Instead, when assessing employee performance, be sure to use output based evaluation.
- **Evaluations for remote/hybrid workers should be done through video conference or in-person.** To prevent any potential misunderstandings, it is important to have context such as facial expressions.
- Equip yourself and others involved in the evaluation process by keeping a copy of our **Performance Evaluation Checklist** nearby when writing and reviewing performance evaluations.

To better understand the research and rationale behind the suggested bias interrupters, read and distribute our **Identifying Bias in Performance Evaluations Guide** which summarizes numerous studies.

<sup>1</sup> Snyder, K. (2014, August 26). The abrasiveness trap: High-achieving men and women are described differently in reviews. *Fortune*. Retrieved from <http://fortune.com/2014/08/26/performance-review-gender-bias/>

<sup>2</sup> Williams, J.C., Lewin Loyd, D., Boginsky, M., & Korn, R.M. (2021). How One Company Worked to Root Out Bias from Performance Reviews. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2021/04/how-one-company-worked-to-root-out-bias-from-performance-reviews>

<sup>3</sup> Ameri, M., Schur, L., Adya, M., Bentley, F. S., McKay, P., & Kruse, D. (2018). The disability employment puzzle: A field experiment on employer hiring behavior. *ILR Review*, 71(2), 329-364. doi: [10.1177/0019793917717474](https://doi.org/10.1177/0019793917717474)

<sup>4</sup> Tilcsik, A. (2011). Pride and prejudice: Employment discrimination against openly gay men in the United States. *American Journal of Sociology*, 117(2), 586-626. doi: 10.1086/661653

<sup>5</sup> Cuddy, A. J. C., Norton, M. I., Fiske, S. T. (2005). This old stereotype: The pervasiveness and persistence of the elderly stereotype. *Journal of Social Issues*, 61(2), 265-283. doi: [10.1111/j.1540-4560.2005.00405.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2005.00405.x)

<sup>6</sup> Benson, A., Li, D., Shue, K. (2021). "Potential and the Gender Promotion Gap." Working Paper.

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<sup>8</sup> Brescoll, V. L., & Uhlmann, E. L. (2005). Attitudes toward traditional and nontraditional parents. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 29(4), 436-445. doi: [10.1111/j.1471-6402.2005.00244.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.2005.00244.x); Brescoll, V. L., & Uhlmann, E. L. (2008). Can angry women get ahead? Gender, status conferral,

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<sup>9</sup> Allen, T. D. (2006). Rewarding good citizens: The relationship between citizenship behavior, gender, and organizational rewards. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 36(1), 120-143. doi: 10.1111/j.0021-9029.2006.00006.x ; Deaux, K., & Major, B. (1987). Putting gender into context: An interactive model of gender-related behavior. *Psychological review*, 94(3), 369-389. doi: 10.1037/0033-295X.94.3.369; Heilman M. E., & Chen J. J. (2005). Same behavior, different consequences: Reactions to men's and women's altruistic citizenship. *Behavior Journal of Applied Psychology*, 90(3), 431– 441 doi: 10.1037/0021-9010.90.3.431; Kanter, R. M. (1977). Some effects of proportions on group life: Skewed sex ratios and responses to token women. *American Journal of Sociology*, 82(5), 965-990. doi: 10.1086/226425; Williams, J. C., & Dempsey, R. W. (2014). *What works for women at work: Four patterns working women should know*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

<sup>10</sup> Thorndike, E. L. (1920). A constant error in psychological ratings. *Journal of applied psychology*, 4(1), 25-29.

<sup>11</sup> Brewer, M. B. (1999). The psychology of prejudice: Ingroup love and outgroup hate? *Journal of Social Issues*, 55(3), 429-444. doi:10.1111/0022-4537.00126; Brewer, M. B., & Gardner, W. (1996). Who is this "we"? Levels of collective identity and self-representations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71(1), 83-93. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.71.1.83; Hewstone, M. (1990). The 'ultimate attribution error'? A review of the literature on intergroup causal attribution. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 20(4), 311-335. doi: 10.1002/ejsp.2420200404

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## BIAS INTERRUPTERS FOR PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS *Identifying Bias in Performance Evaluations Guide*

The five patterns below describe *tendencies not absolutes*. Here's what to watch out for:

**Prove-It-Again! ("PIA")** — Groups stereotyped as less competent often have to prove themselves over and over. "PIA groups" include women, people of color, individuals with disabilities,<sup>1</sup> older employees,<sup>2</sup> members of the LGBTQIA+ community,<sup>3</sup> and first-generation professionals.<sup>4</sup>

1. **"He'll crush it"; "They're not ready."** PIA groups are judged on performance; others on potential.<sup>5</sup>
2. **"He's skilled; she's lucky."** PIA groups' successes attributed to luck, majority men's successes attributed to skill.<sup>6</sup>
3. **"It could happen to anyone"; "She blew it."** PIA groups' mistakes tend to be noticed more and remembered longer, whereas majority men's mistakes tend to be written off.<sup>7</sup>
4. **PIA groups get horns; others a halo.** Horns=one weakness generalized into an overall negative rating. Halo=one strength generalized into a global positive rating. In addition, mistakes by one PIA group member may reinforce negative group stereotypes.<sup>8</sup>
5. **"We applied the rule—until we didn't."** Objective requirements applied rigorously to PIA groups—but applied leniently or waived for majority men.<sup>9</sup>
6. **Little white lies.** Women, people of color and people with disabilities tend to receive less specific and less honest feedback — meaning they aren't given the opportunity to improve.<sup>10</sup>
7. **Do only the superstars survive?** Superstars may escape PIA problems that affect others.<sup>11</sup>

**Tightrope** — A narrower range of workplace behavior often is accepted from women<sup>12</sup>, people of color,<sup>13</sup> and members of the LGBTQIA+ community<sup>14</sup> ("TR groups"). First-generation professionals and modest or introverted men can face Tightrope problems, too.

1. **Leader or worker bee?** TR groups face pressure to be "worker bees" who work hard and are undemanding...but if they comply, they lack "leadership potential."<sup>15</sup>
2. **Modest, helpful, nice; dutiful daughter, office mom?** Prescriptive stereotypes create pressures on women to be modest, mild-mannered team players—so "ambitious" is not a compliment for women and niceness may be optional for men but required of women.<sup>16</sup>
3. **Direct and assertive—or angry and abrasive?** Direct, competitive, and assertive in majority men may be seen as inappropriate in TR groups — "tactless," "selfish," "difficult," "abrasive." Anger that's accepted from majority men may be seen as inappropriate or even threatening in TR groups.<sup>17</sup>
4. **Office housework vs glamour work.** TR groups report less access to career-enhancing opportunities and more "office housework"—planning parties & cleaning up; taking notes & arranging meeting times; mentoring & being the peacemaker.<sup>18</sup>
5. **"She's a prima donna"; "He knows his own worth."** The kind of self-promotion that works for majority men may be seen as off-putting in TR groups. Modest men may encounter bias about how "real men" should behave. Strong modesty norms can make first-generation professionals, people of Asian descent, and women uncomfortable with self-promotion.<sup>19</sup>
6. **LGBTQIA+ employees** may be stereotyped as "too feminine," "too masculine," or just "too gay."<sup>20</sup> These kinds of judgement signal illegal discrimination under federal and state law.

**The Parental Wall** can affect parents of all genders — as well as employees without children.

1. **“He has a family to support.”** Fathers face expectations that they will not—or should not—take time off for caregiving. They may be seen as deserving more pay or promotion because of their presumed family role.<sup>21</sup>
2. **“Her priorities lie elsewhere.”** Mothers are stereotyped as less competent and committed, are held to higher performance and punctuality standards—and are half as likely to be promoted as identical candidates without children.<sup>22</sup>
3. **“I worry about her children.”** Mothers who work long hours tend to be disliked and held to higher performance standards.<sup>23</sup>
4. **“It’s not a good time for her.”** Opportunities or promotions may be withheld on the assumption that mothers will not—or should not—want them.
5. **“No life.”** Employees without children may face the assumption that they can always pick up the slack because they have “no life.”<sup>24</sup>

**Tug of War** — Sometimes bias creates conflict within historically excluded groups.<sup>25</sup>

1. **Tokenism.** If there is only one “token” woman or person of color on a team, they might be treated like they are only in the room to provide diversity, not expertise. Then, when it comes times for performance evaluations, they will get dinged for not having completed as many impressive assignments.
2. **Strategic distancing and the loyalty tax.** People from historically excluded groups may feel they need to distance themselves from others of their group, or align with the majority against their own group, in order to get ahead. In performance evaluations, this might mean giving a lower rating to your own group members to avoid being accused of favoritism.
3. **Passthroughs. PIA:** People from historically excluded groups may hold members of their own groups to higher standards because “That’s what it takes to succeed here.” **Tightrope:** Women or LGBTQIA+ employees may fault each other for being too masculine—or too feminine. People of color may fault each other for being “too white”—or not “white” enough.<sup>26</sup> **Parental wall:** Parents may fault each other for handling parenthood the wrong way—for taking too much time off or too little.<sup>27</sup>

**Racial Stereotypes** — People of Asian descent are often stereotyped as passive and lacking in social skills; Black people as angry or too aggressive; Latino/a people as hotheaded or emotional.<sup>28</sup>

### Seven Powerful Bias Interrupters

1. Give 3 pieces of evidence (from the evaluation period) to explain and back up your rating.
2. Make sure to give everyone—or no one—the benefit of the doubt.
3. If you waive objective rules, do so consistently.
4. Don’t insist on likeability, modesty, or deference from some but not others.
5. Don’t make assumptions about what mothers—or other caregivers—want or are able to do.
6. If you comment on “culture fit,” “executive presence,” or other vague concepts, start with a clear definition and keep track to ensure such concepts are applied consistently.
7. Give honest feedback to everyone who is evaluated—otherwise some groups won’t get notice of problems in time to correct them.

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# BIAS INTERRUPTERS *small steps big change*

## BIAS INTERRUPTERS FOR MANAGERS *Performance Evaluation Checklist*

- 1. Before you start** make sure your evaluation form and process meets the following criteria.
  - As a reviewer make sure you have clear criteria of what you're evaluating given the employee's role. Share these criteria with the employee being evaluated ahead of time.
  - Designate separate boxes for feedback about performance and potential.
  - Designate separate boxes for any personality-related feedback, it should not be clumped in with skillset related remarks.
  - If there is a self-review component, be sure to distribute the **Writing an Effective Self-Evaluation Guide** to the employee ahead of time.

- 2. While you review** keep in mind the following:

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.<sup>1</sup> That said, a comment doesn't need to be negative in order to be harmful. For example, when a reviewer says something like "he's friendly and gets along well with everyone," they're leaving out the skills that leave that impression. It's more effective and accurate to instead say, "he has strong interpersonal skills, best showcased by his ability to lead projects across multiple departments." Instead of focusing on someone's personal vibe, zeroing in on their actions will help clarify your feedback and in turn help the employee better address their strengths and weakness.

### **Flag Words and Phrases in Performance Evaluations:**

*If one of the terms below is used, reviewers must attach a concrete example/reason for that evaluation. Providing evidence for any assessment should be expected.*

- Abrasive, difficult, rude, aggressive
- Personality
- Loud, outspoken
- Quiet, shy
- Tone issues
- Bubbly, perky
- Not a team player
- Not flexible, unreliable
- Unprofessional or inappropriate attire
- Potential, not ready, too green (for promotion, task, etc.)
- Mother, father, parent, their child, caregiver

Some of these phrases may be appropriate in a performance evaluation, but they *must* be contextualized and supported with skills and role criteria-related evidence.

### **Carve out time for bouncebacks:**

If someone you supervise turns in a performance evaluation that doesn't follow the guidelines you've outlined, then consider a bounceback. Take the time to talk through why your department puts a value on the given criteria and create a plan to remedy their evaluations going forward, including editing the one that sparked your concern.

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<sup>1</sup> Snyder, K. (2014, August 26). The abrasiveness trap: High-achieving men and women are described differently in reviews. *Fortune*. Retrieved from <http://fortune.com/2014/08/26/performance-review-gender-bias/>

# **BIAS INTERRUPTERS** *small steps big change*

## **BIAS INTERRUPTERS FOR PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS**

### ***Writing an Effective Self-Evaluation Guide***

Some people feel more comfortable with self-promotion than others. Partly it depends on how you were raised: some people were taught to be forthcoming about their accomplishments. Others grew up with the “modesty mandate”—to be self-effacing and underplay their accomplishments.

Regardless of how you were raised, it’s important to learn to engage in deft self-promotion. Research has shown that professionals who self-promote generally are more successful than those who don’t. When asked to provide a self-evaluation as part of your organization’s performance evaluation process, the first step is to understand what’s expected.

Here are a few simple steps to help. They’ll prove useful for all groups, helping you to tone it down a bit if you tend towards bluster or to step it up if you were raised with the modesty mandate.

#### ***1. Don’t hold yourself to higher standards: “Am I ready?”***

Research shows that women often hold themselves to much stricter standards than men, and often underestimate their own contributions. Women also are less likely to question negative feedback. The same may be true of other groups. Make sure you have a sufficient network at your organization so you know how other people are judging themselves. It’s not fair to yourself—or your organization—to judge yourself too harshly. You are not perfect—but no one else is, either.

#### ***2. Identify what objective metrics are important in your context.***

If you have a sales goal, it’s easy to identify what objective metrics matter at work. Often metrics are subtler, but most workplaces have objective metrics that matter. Do you know what they are? If not, ask someone you trust. (If you don’t have anyone to ask, ask someone in Human Resources—and work on building your network within your organization.)

#### ***3. Show that you’ve met and exceeded the objective metrics that matter.***

It may be time-consuming to identify and gather the relevant evidence to show you’ve met the objective metrics that matter. Spend the time. Start collecting this evidence early in the relevant review period. Keep a folder with relevant accomplishments and create documents to track progress.

#### ***4. Keep track of compliments.***

“Good job”—that’s not the kind of compliment we’re talking about. But if someone told you something like, “That’s the best memo I’ve seen in years from a first-year associate,” you need to find some way of getting that into your self-evaluation. Try this: “I know I still need to develop my skills in X area, but when Y said Z it gave me the confidence to believe my efforts will succeed.”

**5. Lose the doubt raisers.**

Everyone has doubts. But if you don't show confidence in yourself, why should others show confidence in you? Reread your self-evaluation and take out phrases such as "I just wanted to tell you," "I think maybe," "I wonder if..." Display quiet confidence that you can succeed with hard work. (If that's not true, you can leave later—but even if you leave you want to leave a good impression.)

**6. No need to brag; just state the facts.**

It's generally better to avoid characterizing yourself and just provide the facts. "I was pleased to be asked to work with team X so early in my career" versus "I am just that brilliant that I am the most junior person ever invited to work on team X." Let others draw the conclusions. Research shows that people who engage in blatant self-promotion tend to put others off.

**7. Be comprehensive.**

Take the time to include all the facts that make you look good.

**8. Be honest and specific about your drawbacks—and how you intend to address them.**

Someone who believes they have no room for improvement is difficult to work with. Nobody's perfect; someone who thinks so is deluding themselves. *"I believe that the next step for me is to develop my own accounts, and look forward to working on that next year."* *"I had a few instances this year where my proofing was not as accurate as it should be, and I have taken steps to ensure that never happens again."* Ideally show that you're making progress in areas of improvement by describing corrective steps you've taken and providing evidence of improvement (if possible). For example:

*"I had a few instances this year where I missed meetings due to calendaring errors and received feedback I needed to improve in this area. I implemented a new calendaring system to ensure more reliable schedule-keeping and have not missed any meetings since. I will continue to ensure my attendance meets expectations."*

**9. What if you made a big mistake?**

Be straightforward, acknowledge the mistake, and explain the steps you've taken to make sure it never happens again. But first be sure it *is* a big mistake. Apologizing over and over again for the kinds of small mistakes everyone makes at one point or another shows as poor judgment, as does failing to sufficiently apologize when one does make a Big One.