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.[1] 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.[2]

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,[3] members of the LGBTQIA+ community,[4] older employees,[5] 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.[6]

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?[7] 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.[8]

- **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.[9] 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).[10]

- **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.[11]

- **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.[12] 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.

---

[1] 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/

[2] 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

[3] 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

[4] 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

[5] 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

[6] Benson, A., Li, D., Shue, K. (2021). "Potential and the Gender Promotion Gap." Working Paper.

[7] Snyder, K. (2014)

[8] 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; Brescoll, V. L., & Uhlmann, E. L. (2008). Can angry women get ahead? Gender, status conferral,

and workplace emotion expression. *Psychological Science, 19*(3), 268–275. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02079.x; Judge, T. A., Livingston B. A., & Hurst, C. (2012). Do nice guys--and gals--really finish last? The joint effects of sex and agreeableness on income. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 102*(2), 390-407. doi: 10.1037/a0026021; Rudman, L. A., & Fairchild, K. (2004). Reactions to counterstereotypic behavior: the role of backlash in cultural stereotype maintenance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 87*(2), 157-176. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.87.2.157

[9] 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.

[10] Thorndike, E. L. (1920). A constant error in psychological ratings. Journal of applied psychology, 4(1), 25-29.

[11] 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

[12] Cristea, I. C., & Leonardi, P. M. (2019). Get noticed and die trying: Signals, sacrifice, and the production of face time in distributed work. Organization Science, 30(3), 552-572.