

Tools for Managers and HR

How to Interrupt Bias in Performance Evaluations

A best practice is for someone at HR to be trained to review performance evaluations to check for possible bias. This worksheet is a good start.

Controlling Prove-It-Again Bias (“PIA bias”)

Groups stereotyped as less competent often have to provide more evidence in order to be judged equally competent. Groups that have to “prove it again” (“PIA groups”) commonly include women, African-Americans, Latino/as, individuals with disabilities, and Asian-Americans (particularly in leadership roles). Here are the technical names for PIA bias.¹

Bias Interrupters – What to look for in reviewing performance evaluations:

1. **“She’s not ready.”** A persistent pattern of PIA groups being seen as “not ready” for promotion may signal that they’re being required to provide more evidence of competence than others, or aren’t given the same access to career-enhancing assignments.
2. **Glamour work versus behind-the-scenes work.** Asian-Americans are stereotyped as being good at technical work but low on leadership skills. Analyze performance evaluations to assess whether Asian-Americans are doing more behind-the-scenes work and/or have trouble being seen as having leadership or promotion potential.

Controlling Tightrope Bias (gender)

High-status jobs are seen as requiring masculine qualities—but women are expected to be feminine. So women often find themselves walking a tightrope between being seen as too masculine (and so respected but not liked) or too feminine (and so liked but not respected).

Women are expected to be self-effacing and nice—good team players. Men are expected to be ambitious, direct, assertive, and competitive. Women often find themselves walking a tightrope as they try to strike a balance that allows them to be seen both as competent and as likable.²

Tightrope bias includes pressures to behave in feminine ways, penalties for women who do so, and backlash against women who behave in masculine ways.

Bias Interrupters – What to look for in reviewing performance evaluations:

Backlash for masculine behavior:

1. **Separate style from skills.** Analyze your evaluations for Tightrope Trigger Words such as “aggressive,” “abrasive,” “sharp elbows,” “outspoken,” “prima donna,” “not a team player,” “a real self-promoter,” “mean,” or “bitch.” One study of performance evaluations found, of those who received negative

comments, 75% of women but only 2% of men received comments about negative personality traits; negative comments about men focused almost exclusively on skill sets they needed to develop further. (Snyder, 2014). Of course, some women have relevant personality issues; the question is whether a broader range of behavior is accepted in men than women.

2. **Anger.** Is anger is accepted more in men than women? Studies show it often is.
3. **She's a shameless self-promoter/he knows his worth.** Men who self-promote are typically seen as competitive and ambitious. Women who self-promote may be seen as prima donnas.

Pressure to behave in feminine ways:

4. **Office housework vs. glamour work.** Are women not getting promoted because they aren't getting access to career-enhancing assignments? Sometimes women fail to advance because they face pressures to do more unsung behind-the-scenes work, and have less access to career-enhancing "glamour work." Are women regularly criticized as "not team players" when they turn down undervalued tasks men typically aren't asked to do? Are they doing a disproportionate amount of diversity work? If so, you need to address this crucial climate issue.

Penalties for feminine behavior:

5. **Executive presence.** Are women regularly faulted for lack of executive presence or assertiveness? They may fear pushback if they behave more assertively. Or they may need training on how to project credibility and confidence.

Controlling Tightrope Bias (race)

Prescriptive stereotypes have been studied far less in the context of race.

Bias Interrupters – What to look for in reviewing performance evaluations:

1. **Anger.** Is anger accepted less when a person of color shows it? (Being called an "angry Black person" typically is not a career-enhancing move for men or women.)
2. **Self-promotion.** One study of NFL celebration dances found Black players garnered higher yardage penalties than whites. Look for patterns that self-promotion is more accepted in men or white people than women and people of color.
3. **Racial comfort strategies.** Look for signs that people of color need to employ "comfort" strategies to ensure that white people are comfortable in order to get ahead.

Parental Wall

Motherhood triggers strong negative competence and commitment assumptions. And mothers who do work long hours may be seen as bad mothers—and so as bad people. While mothers may receive messages they are not, or should not, be breadwinners, fathers may receive messages that they should be breadwinners without family responsibilities.³

Bias Interrupters – What to look for in reviewing performance evaluations:

1. **Maternal wall trigger words.** “She’s a mother,” “Her priorities lie elsewhere,” “I worry about her children.” These comments are not relevant to an employee’s performance, and suggest bias.
2. **Do men receive the message they should behave as breadwinners, not caregivers?** Sometimes men are under strong informal pressures not to take parental leave, request a flexible schedule, or take time off to care for children or other family members. If men in your organization don’t typically take parental leave, or take only a few weeks, they may well be feeling strong informal pressures that could open your company up to liability.
3. **Flexibility stigma.** The comment “S/he’s part time,” is relevant only to assess whether someone’s output is commensurate with her schedule. The assumption that women—or men—who take leave, go part time, or adopt a flexible schedule are less committed to their work is associated with gender bias.
4. **“No life?”** Women without children also confront bias. Often they are assumed to have “no life” and therefore expected to work the longest hours.

Tug of War (race & gender)

Sometimes gender bias fuels conflicts among women, and racial bias fuels conflicts among people of color.

Bias Interrupters – What to look for in reviewing performance evaluations:

1. **Prove-it-again pass-through.** Do people of color and/or women in your organization feel they need to be harder on their own group because “that’s what it takes to succeed here”?
2. **Tokenism.** When there’s only room for one woman or person of color in a prized role, people within that group may be pitted against each other for the one, treasured spot.
3. **Loyalty tax.** Sometimes women and people of color are faulted for focusing too much on women’s or diversity issues. People should be able to advocate for their group(s) without being penalized.
4. **Favoritism?** Are people of color’s or women’s positive assessments of members of their own group members dismissed as favoritism?
5. **Tightrope pass-through.** Women may fault each other for being too masculine—or too feminine. For example, a woman manager who gives developmental feedback may be judged as “mean”—reflecting expectations that she be an endlessly supportive mother figure (rather than what she is: a manager).
6. **Maternal wall pass-through.** Women may fault each other for handling motherhood the wrong way—taking off too much time or too little.
7. **No life?** Are women without kids expected to work longest hours on assumptions they have “no lives?”
8. **Conflict with support staff.** Sometimes women report less support from support staff—a pattern that can also affect professionals of color.

Bias Interrupters

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¹ Technical names for Prove-it-Again include cognitive bias, implicit bias, descriptive bias, attribution bias, in-group favoritism, casuistry, confirmation bias, stereotype-expectancy, and recall bias.

² The technical name for Tightrope bias is prescriptive bias. Both men and women hold prescriptive stereotypes about how the “good woman” or the “man to be reckoned with” should behave.

³ The technical names for bias triggered by motherhood are descriptive and prescriptive maternal wall bias. The technical name for prescriptive bias triggered by fatherhood is the flexibility stigma.