

How Gender Bias Corrupts Performance Reviews, and What to Do About It

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The annual performance review already has many strikes against it. Harried managers end up recalling high and low points on the fly; employees often get unclear direction.

Here's another flaw: Women are shortchanged by these reviews. In my forthcoming book on gender bias in the workplace, cowritten with journalist Kim Kleman, we present scores of successful interventions I have used in large domestic and international professional services firms to level the playing field for women in appraisals and promotions, among other areas.

One of my findings, using content analysis of individual annual performance reviews, shows that women were 1.4 times more likely to receive critical subjective feedback (as opposed to either positive feedback or critical objective feedback).

That's because annual evaluations *are* often subjective, which opens the door to gender bias ("Tom is more comfortable and independent than Carolyn in handling the client's concerns") and confirmation bias ("I knew she'd struggle with that project"), among other things.

I found that these biases can lead to double standards, in that a situation can get a positive or a negative spin, depending on gender. In one review I read, the manager noted, "Heidi seems to shrink when she's around others, and especially around clients, she needs to be more self-confident." But a similar problem — confidence in working with clients — was given a positive spin when a man was struggling with it: "Jim needs to develop his natural ability to work with people."

In another pair of reviews, the reviewer highlighted the woman's "analysis paralysis," while the same behavior in a male colleague was seen as careful thoughtfulness: "Simone seems paralyzed and confused when facing tight deadlines to make decisions," while "Cameron seems hesitant in making decisions, yet he is able to work out multiple alternative solutions and determined the most suitable one." Double standards like these clearly affect women's opportunities for advancement.

Likewise, it does your company no good when employees are overrated because of subjective biases, including leniency (for example, an employee dropped the ball, but "he had a lot on his plate") and the "halo effect," where one positive trait is assumed to be linked to others ("He inspires confidence, which goes a long way").

My data also revealed that women got less constructively critical feedback. The objective of constructive feedback is to allow an employee to focus on the positives while identifying areas where there is room for growth. For example, such feedback might be, "Stephanie, your replies to partners about client matters are often not on point" rather than "Stephanie, you have missed important opportunities to provide clear and concise information, such as X. I have some thoughts on how you could prevent that from happening again, such as Y." These findings are in line with research from my colleagues at Stanford University, [Shelley Correll](#) and [Caroline Simard](#), whose work suggests that women receive vaguer feedback than men do.



Finally, women's performance was more likely to be attributed to characteristics such as luck or their ability to spend long hours in the office, perceived as real commitment to the firm, rather than their abilities and skills. As such, they often did not receive due credit for their work.

The good news is that the performance appraisal system can be fixed. By using more-objective criteria, involving a broader group of reviewers, and adjusting the frequency of reviews, it is possible to remove subjective biases that creep in.

Specifically, my field experiments at professional services firms suggest that the use of tailor-made, automated, real-time communication tools with instant feedback on employees' weekly performance from supervisors, colleagues, and clients can have dramatic results for women.

As opposed to the traditional annual feedback system, these instruments were designed to remove bias from answers (e.g., the language of feedback options is gender-neutral) and help the reviewers to provide constructive feedback. The order of requested feedback was given careful consideration in the instruments' design, all in an effort to create a level playing field.

Another benefit is that having more-frequent feedback gives opportunities to recognize different styles of leadership. As the [seminal work](#) of Alice Eagly at Northwestern University has demonstrated, there are differences in leadership styles among gender. Her work, followed by other [researchers](#), has revealed that women's leadership styles are less hierarchical and more cooperative, participatory, and collaborative than their male counterparts'.

Women's strengths, such as their collaborative and participatory styles, were more easily recognized when using this new appraisal system. For example, instant feedback included: "The employee is a team player and understands how to help others in time of need" or "The employee contributes to the success of the team on a regular basis." In other words, it resulted in the information used for developmental and assessment purposes being more accurate and gender-neutral.

Giving frequent feedback might sound like a lot of work, especially for large teams. It's not. Feedback involves two to six reviewers per week, and takes each of them no more than 15 minutes.

One of the other benefits is that the clients who participated in these experiments were asked to evaluate the performance of the people who served them. The clients felt listened to and engaged in the process of providing constructive feedback on what they valued in the relationship and how they could be better served.

For example, colleagues might rate each other on the criterion "clear information is provided to the client during the call," while clients are asked whether the employee serving them "addressed my concerns and showed interest during the call." These evaluations are collected over time in a broader category called "client relationship."

The responses are weighted by how much exposure the feedback providers have to the person they are rating. On a quarterly basis, the employee sits down with the manager for a check-in and goes over the results.

The advantages of this approach, compared with annual reviews, are myriad for managers:

- They receive objective criteria to provide a comprehensive look at performance. Moreover, they get detail they've never had before: how constant employees' performance is, how they grow over the course of the year (or the project cycle), how they respond to feedback over time, their weak and strong points, and areas where they excel.
- They can observe the employee and value the person's behavior in different contexts, as each reviewer provides input and expresses preferences for certain styles. Managers can see how various appraisers attach different weights to the same aspects of performance they experienced.
- In turn, managers learn the kind of support and exposure they need to provide each employee for optimal performance with supervisors, peers, subordinates, and clients.

Employees being reviewed gain as well:

- They're evaluated for their actual performance and work relationships, not by their boss's impressions. In my research, the likelihood of women receiving subjective feedback in the form of negative personality-based criticism disappears or significantly decreases with this approach.
- They get a diagnostic instrument that facilitates self-management, because real-time reviews give examples of effective (or ineffective) behavior and convey information on what the individual must start, stop, or continue doing.

Companies can start leveling the playing field by redesigning their performance appraisal system with a few simple steps:

- Invest in systems that crowdsource and continually collect data about the performance of people and teams. Crowdsourcing performance data throughout the year yields even better insights about your staff.
- Train appraisers to give feedback about specific criteria that the employer and employee agree to. The resulting appraisal of the person on these criteria is then perceived as fairer.
- Develop an appraisal scale that specifies what an employee must start doing, stop doing, or continue doing by tenure and project cycle.
- Transform what feedback is meant to achieve, using a tool with gender-neutral criteria.