

ASSESSING PERFORMANCE AND POTENTIAL

See Bias | Block Bias™

Assessing performance and potential is an essential component of hiring, developing, retaining and advancing employees. The evaluation of performance happens constantly, both formally and informally. These constant evaluations lead to judgments about who is “high potential,” who needs to improve and who should get access to challenging and high visibility assignments leading to career advancement.

LEARNING GOAL

Learn how bias can unintentionally influence evaluations of merit in hiring, developing, retaining and advancing employees.

RESEARCH INSIGHTS: UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

Research shows that stereotypes can introduce biases or bugs into the processes where managers evaluate employees, producing lower assessments for some and more lenient evaluations for others—despite the same qualifications and level of accomplishment. In both cases, when evaluations fail to fairly assess talent, the impact can be far reaching in terms of ratings, promotions and opportunities to get the best assignments—and, ultimately, in terms of employee turnover, engagement and company performance.

How can you evaluate employees more accurately and fairly? By identifying common patterns of bias, you can better recognize, value and assess the talent that diverse employees bring to the workplace.

EXAMPLES OF TIMES WHEN YOU MIGHT EVALUATE PERFORMANCE AND POTENTIAL OF CANDIDATES AND EMPLOYEES:

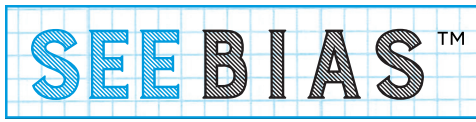
- Reviewing resumes
- Evaluating responses to interview questions
- Providing feedback during interview round-ups
- Writing performance evaluations
- Speaking in calibration meetings
- Writing sponsorship or advocacy statements
- Providing informal recognition in emails and in meetings
- Writing letters of recommendation

ABOUT THE SEE BIAS | BLOCK BIAS™ TOOLKITS

The Center for the Advancement of Women’s Leadership is an innovative initiative launched at Stanford University to create more inclusive workplaces, empower women and engage men and women change agents in creating equality. These See Bias | Block Bias™ Toolkits are designed to offer insights from our own research, as well as research from leading institutions and scholars from around the world. They are intended to be companion pieces for the Clayman Institute workshops.

Stanford

**Center for the Advancement
of Women’s Leadership**
Clayman Institute for Gender Research



How can you see bias in the evaluation process?

HIGHER BAR AND INCREASED SCRUTINY

Even at equal levels of performance, women's performance is often subjected to increased scrutiny. Why? Stereotypes often associate men with having more competence, especially in male-dominated fields like science, technology, sales, leadership and military or police work. These stereotypes lead evaluators to scrutinize women's performance more, which can cause them to judge women as less competent than equally performing men. What this means is that the bar is often higher for women, resulting in lower performance ratings. More generally, the same level of performance can be rated lower for someone who doesn't fit the stereotype of success in a given field than for someone who does. So women may have their accomplishments unconsciously downplayed or overlooked, even when they meet the same standards as their male counterparts.

Research Insight: In a study where identical resumes were shown to hiring managers, the resume with the woman's name was criticized for not proving that she had gotten the results on her own; the same scrutiny was not applied to the identical resume with the male name (Steinpreis, Anders, Ritzke 1999).

LENIENCY

The flip side of higher scrutiny for women is that male candidates may receive too little scrutiny because they are assumed to already have the necessary skills. Leniency is also an error in evaluation, meaning that some candidates may be promoted or get a "pass" without a fair evaluation of their qualifications or performance. Leniency towards groups that receive less scrutiny can lead evaluators to miss actual mistakes in an application or performance review.

Research Insight: When partners at law firms were asked to evaluate a legal brief written by a hypothetical law associate, they missed spelling, grammatical and technical errors when they believed the brief was written by a more stereotypical (white male) associate. They noticed many more errors when they believed a Black male associate wrote the same brief (Reeves 2014). In other words, stereotypes give some employees leniency (a "pass") and others even higher levels of scrutiny.

PREFERRING A NARROW LEADERSHIP STYLE

Many companies thoughtfully craft leadership principles, outlining the skills and behaviors the company values in its leaders. In many cases, these leadership principles include a spectrum of behaviors, from collaborative to decisive. However, some evaluators unconsciously place more value on a narrower list of leadership attributes, especially during promotions. For example, evaluators may unconsciously prefer leaders who are described with more agentic leadership qualities, like decisiveness, than with collaborative qualities, such as being a good listener, even if both are equally emphasized in the leadership principles.

Research Insight: Agentic traits in leadership are those traits that emphasize independence, assertiveness, control and decisiveness. Because of gender stereotypes, those traits are more likely to be implicitly associated with men and masculinity, as opposed to more nurturing leadership traits of consensus building, developing others and collaboration, which are more likely to be implicitly associated with women and femininity (Eagly, Karau 2002). If evaluators value agentic traits more than collaborative ones during reviews, men will have the advantage.

LIKEABILITY PENALTY

People possess entrenched cultural ideas that associate men with leadership qualities like decisiveness, authoritativeness and strength and women with nurturing qualities like warmth, friendliness and kindness. Consequently, when women behave in dominant or assertive ways, they are often seen as unlikeable because they violate norms of female niceness and modesty. This is called the likeability penalty. Alternatively, women displaying feminine traits are judged as nice but are seen as less competent and capable. This is called the competence penalty. Women, then, face a kind of trade off: competency vs. likeability. Men do not face this kind of trade off. Powerful men are simultaneously seen as likeable and competent.

Research Insight: The likeability penalty can show up as a criticism of women's communication styles. In a review of performance evaluations, women's reviews were significantly more likely to contain negative comments about their communication styles. Comments ranged from advising women to "change your communication style" to negative feedback such as being "too aggressive" or "off putting" (Clayman Institute 2015).