

Be a Bias Interrupter!

Tools for Individuals

How to Spot and Avoid Bias When Evaluating Others

Four basic types of bias commonly occur in evaluations. These patterns have been documented in hundreds of studies for decades. Even small bias can have profound effects over time.

Two powerful bias interrupters are:

1. Don't make a global judgment about someone without giving evidence to back it up; and
2. If you comment about "culture fit" or other vague, subjective concepts, be sure to define what you mean by these very ambiguous phrases (and ideally make these definitions well-known at the onset of the review period, rather than when the evaluation is being conducted).

Prove-It-Again!

Make sure you don't slip into double standards. Groups stereotyped as low in competence often have to perform better to be judged equally competent. Groups that have to "prove it again" ("PIA groups") commonly include women, African-Americans, Latino/as, individuals with disabilities, Asian-Americans (particularly in leadership roles), and other historically underrepresented groups. Some things to watch out for:

1. **Potential vs performance.** PIA groups are judged on potential; others on performance or what they've already accomplished.
2. **Mistakes.** PIA groups' mistakes are noticed more and remembered longer.
3. **Successes.** PIA groups' successes are attributed to luck or circumstance rather than skill.
4. **Halo/horns.** PIA group members get horns—one weakness is generalized into an overall negative rating. Others get a halo—one strength is generalized into a global positive rating.
5. **Superstars vs the merely excellent.** Superstars from PIA groups get even higher evaluations than do other superstars—but those just one notch below have to prove themselves over and over.
6. **Leniency bias.** Objective requirements are applied rigorously to PIA groups but leniently to others.
7. **Shifting standards.** The stereotype that Asian-Americans are "naturally" good at technical skills or hard work can cause them to be held to higher standards.

**The above patterns reflect tendencies, not absolutes.*

Tightrope (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). The Tightrope consists of three distinct patterns: pressure to behave in feminine ways, penalties for doing so, and pushback for behaving in masculine ways.

Pressure to behave in feminine ways:

1. **Modest, helpful, nice?** Women often face pressure to conform to the image of the “good woman” – a good team player attuned to others’ comfort—not ambitious or someone who seeks the spotlight.
2. **Office mom, dutiful daughter.** Sometimes women are pressured into narrow, traditionally feminine roles, such as the dutiful daughter who aligns with a powerful man but never threatens his dominance.
3. **Office housework.** Women often face expectations that they do the “office housework,” which includes:
 - Literal housework (planning parties, cleaning up);
 - Administrative work (taking notes, arranging meeting times, getting the room);
 - Emotion work (mentoring, smoothing over conflict); and
 - Undervalued behind-the-scenes work (as opposed to the “glamour work”)

Penalties for traditionally feminine behaviors:

4. **Executive presence.** Sometimes women self-edit their behavior in order to avoid backlash for masculine behaviors—and then are faulted for lacking “executive presence.”

Pushback for traditionally masculine behaviors:

5. **Tightrope trigger words.** Women who behave in masculine ways often are seen as unlikable—described as having “sharp elbows,” “outspoken,” “aggressive,” “bitch” (i.e. not nice), “not a team player,” “selfish” (too ambitious), or “prima donna” (not self-effacing). One study found that 75% women who received negative comments in performance evaluations were faulted for personality problems. Only 2% of men were [\(Snyder, 2014\)](#). Of course, some women do have relevant personality problems—as do some men. The problem arises when a narrower range of behavior is accepted in men than women.
6. **Anger.** Open displays of anger that are tolerated in men may be seen as out of line in women.
7. **Self-promotion.** The kind of self-promotion that works for men may be seen as off-putting in women.

Tightrope (race & class migrants)

Some stereotypes of people of color may lead to a much narrower range of behavior to be accepted in those groups. Some norms held by whites from nonprofessional backgrounds (class migrants) may disadvantage them, too.

1. **Anger.** Being called an “angry Black person” typically is not a career-enhancing move for either Black men or women. People also may see anger as more inappropriate in an Asian-American person, because it’s less expected due to stereotypes. Work hard to avoid these double standards.
2. **Self-promotion.** One study of NFL celebration dances found Black players garnered higher yardage penalties than whites; let’s make sure this doesn’t carry over to self-promotion in professional contexts. Some groups, notably class migrants and Asian-Americans, have strong modesty norms that can make them uncomfortable with self-promotion.
3. **Racial comfort strategies.** Are people of color required to use “racial comfort strategies” to ensure that white people are comfortable with them in order to get ahead?

Parental wall—for men as well as women

The implicit image of a good mother is someone who puts her kids first. So mothers walk a tightrope between being seen as a good mother but a bad worker, or a good worker but a bad mother. Fathers sometimes are under pressure to be breadwinners—not caregivers.

1. **Inappropriate comments about mothers.** “She’s a mother,” “Her priorities lie elsewhere,” “I worry about her children.” These comments are not relevant to work performance.
2. **Inappropriate comments about fathers.** “He was gone (on parental leave) for so long I question his career commitment.” This kind of comment may give rise to legal liability for your organization.
3. **Don’t make assumptions about career drive or “pregnancy brain.”** Mothers are stereotyped as less competent and committed than identical women without children.
4. **“I worry about her children.”** Mothers who work long hours tend to be disliked and held to higher performance standards. Remember: happy families are not all alike.
5. **Flexibility stigma—for men as well as women.** Comments such as “S/he’s part time” are 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.
6. **“No life.”** Women without children work the longest hours of any group—often because they’re seen as having “no life.” Remember, everyone has a family, and everyone has a life outside of work.

Tug of war

Sometimes bias creates conflict among women or among professionals of color.

1. **Tokenism.** If people feel there's only one "women's" or "minority" slot for a prized position, members of these groups may be pitted against each other to get it.
2. **Loyalty tax.** In workplaces where women or people of color have a fragile hold, these groups may feel they need to align with the majority against members of their own groups.
3. **Prove-it-again pass-through.** Women or people of color may hold members of their own groups to higher standards because "That's what it takes to succeed here as a woman/person of color."
4. **Tightrope pass-through.** Women may fault each other for being too masculine—or too feminine.
5. **Racial comfort strategies.** People of color may fault each other for being "too white"—or not "white" enough.
6. **Maternal wall pass-through.** Women may fault each other for handling motherhood the wrong way—taking off too much time or too little.

Writing an Effective Self-Evaluation

Some people feel more comfortable with self-promotion than others. Partly it depends on how you grew up: 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. The modesty mandate is particularly prevalent among women, mid-westerners, class migrants (professionals who grew up in blue-collar families), and Asian-Americans.

Regardless of how you grew up, 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 you’re 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 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.

Research shows that women often hold themselves to much stricter standards than men, and often underestimate their own contributions.¹ Women also are less likely to question negative feedback.² 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 it’s important to remember 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 more subtle. 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 you need to 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. And 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 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 he is deluding himself. *“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 so 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.

¹ K.M. Bartol, National Center for Women and Information Technology, Spotting Gender Bias in Performance Appraisal (2006); L.E. Atwater, Performance Appraisal, 337 (1998).

² Id.