

How to identify and reduce performance review bias

Performance review bias is tricky to identify and tricky to resolve. Bias is part of the human experience, we all have biases within us based on our personal beliefs and experiences. However, when you hold a position of authority, your bias can have a significant impact on the career path of those you evaluate. Therefore, no matter how common it is, bias is not acceptable within the workplace. Especially when giving performance reviews.

That's where acknowledging and reducing performance review bias comes into place. It's something that might be inherently present. However, it is your responsibility to ensure that those tasked with reviewing others' performance reduce their bias to the greatest degree possible.

What is performance review bias?

It's first essential to understand what bias is. A bias is a prejudice that's in favor of or against someone or something.

The bias could be something we typically think of, such as gender, religion, ethnic background, socioeconomic history, the list goes on and on. On the other hand, the bias could be based on how you evaluate others in general. For example, you may be more lenient or straddle the fence with your assessments.

When bias comes into play during performance evaluations, it makes it nearly impossible to accurately measure employees' performance. This makes it even harder to have fair evaluations across the board.

Examples of performance review bias

There are endless ways to showcase bias when giving performance reviews. Here are some of the most common performance review biases seen within the workplace.

Gender Bias

A common gender bias involves providing feedback that focuses on women's personality traits (ex. She works well with her colleagues). On the other hand, feedback for men might focus more on their accomplishments (ex. He would benefit from professional development to hone his skills). When reviews of men focus on more valuable skills than those of women, it can lead to a more significant pay gap and unequal promotion opportunities within the organization.

Primacy Bias

When exhibiting primacy bias, evaluators will focus more on what they learned about the employee during the beginning phases of their professional relationship. They focus less on the relationship's totality. For example, if you have an initial negative impression, you will tend to be more rigid during the performance evaluation.

Recency Bias

Recency bias occurs when an evaluator judges primarily based on the events that took place most recently, instead of the period in its totality. This is the opposite of the primacy bias because the primary acts that will impact the performance review are the most recent things to have taken place. A good or bad recent few months may overshadow the performance for the rest of the year.

Centrality Bias

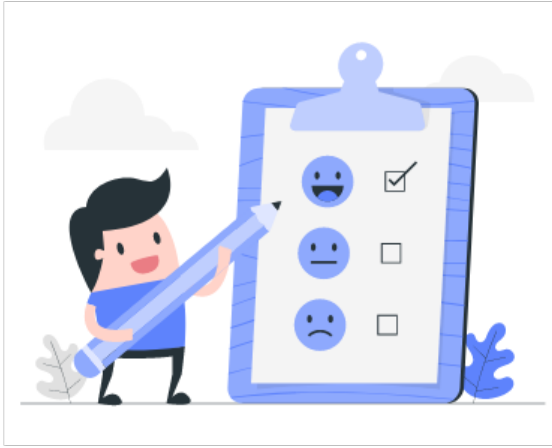
One bias that might not be as obvious is one of centrality. This happens when one remains fairly neutral during evaluations. For example, an evaluator might give most people an average rating in all categories without making a distinction with either higher or lower ratings. Taking this stand can fail to provide a real understanding of the employee's performance.

Halo/Horns Effect Bias

This bias leads to one personality trait overshadowing other traits in a way that doesn't allow for an accurate evaluation of the employee. For example, suppose one has a gift for gab and is well-liked in the office but often misses deadlines and submits subpar work. In that case, their personality could overshadow their shortcoming. The resulting performance review will lack the documentation that notes the improvements needed.

Leniency Bias

Leniency bias is essentially the opposite of centrality bias. In this case, performance reviews tend to be skewed more positively due to the manager giving higher marks across the board, even if all don't deserve them. In doing so, there's no way to differentiate between those who are truly performing better than others.



Develop an evaluation rubric

Provide more specific prompts

Review evaluations regularly

Provide additional guidance on performance reviews

How to avoid performance review bias

Avoiding performance review bias requires you to first acknowledge that bias is present. Then you need to establish a consistent and structured process for performance reviews. Here are some strategies to consider implementing.

Develop an evaluation rubric

A well-written rubric will offer clarity regarding the specific points being evaluated during a performance review. This starts by defining the criteria used to assess the employee and then using evidence to assess the score. This method is better than providing open-ended questions without much guidance surrounding how to answer. When there isn't structure to what's being judged and how to evaluate, it's easier for biases to showcase themselves.

Provide more specific prompts

Generic prompts don't allow for consistency within evaluations. Some managers will give a brief one-sentence reflection while others will write a paragraph. This doesn't allow for an accurate depiction of employee performance across the board. Also, this lack of structure is the perfect breeding ground for bias to slip in. Instead of stating, "How does the employee's performance match the company's quarterly performance expectations?" You can add more structure by requiring that the evaluator include three measurable outcomes for the employee that demonstrate how their performance meets the quarterly company expectations.

Review evaluations regularly

To identify and reduce performance review bias, review evaluations regularly to ensure they meet the organization's expectations. Though evaluations are very person-centric, you can use them to determine patterns of bias.

For example, if an employee has a glowing review yet fails to hit their marks, or an employee is shining in all areas yet has a substandard performance review, you can investigate whether bias has occurred. Another way to look at data is whether the men tend to have a specific trend for their reviews while the women have another. This data can highlight areas of bias to address and ultimately reduce throughout the company.

Provide additional guidance on performance reviews

When you identify managers who are continuing to display bias in performance evaluations, consider how you can better support them in reducing their bias. If they fail to showcase an improvement, consider what other steps might need to be taken. Also, be sure employees know what to do if they feel bias is happening with their performance reviews. The company should have a place for employees to turn to have this conversation without fear of negative repercussions.

Additional Resource: Dealing with a negative performance review can be tricky. Consider including some of these [sample phrases for a negative performance review](#) as a resource for your managers.