BIAS IN PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT REVIEW PROCESS

CREATING AN INCLUSIVE TALENT PIPELINE BY UNDERSTANDING OUR FILTERS

By Leslie Traub, Chief Consulting Officer at Cook Ross Inc.

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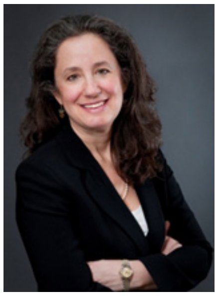
LESLIE TRAUB

CHIEF CONSULTING OFFICER AND CHAIR OF THE BOARD



Leslie Traub

Exceptional facilitation and training, incomparable instructional design, powerful organizational change, impressive social science research, and transformative personal development—these are the award-winning talents that Leslie Traub offers each Cook Ross client. With more than 25 years of experience leading diversity, inclusion, and change management initiatives, Leslie creates sustainable systems of change that yield greater performance, profit, and possibility.

Since joining Cook Ross in 1994, Leslie has developed an international reputation for leading systems based change in shifting an organization's lenses and practices on diverse talent, especially for women. She leads major engagements with financial and professional services, legal, energy, scientific organizations, and numerous federal agencies.

Leslie has worked and lived in numerous cultures and countries. She brings this personal experience and passion to her work in cultural competence and cultural communication in her corporate, professional services, association, and not-for-profit consulting practice. Leslie spent the first 10 years of her career consulting to national primary health care programs in West Africa, conducting operations research on service delivery and national program evaluations. Leslie has served as adjunct faculty for most of the universities in the Washington, DC area, as well as in other cities.

Leslie holds a graduate certificate in Change Management from The Johns Hopkins University, a Masters in Biostatistics and Epidemiology from Tulane University, a B.A. in economics and history from Wheaton College in Massachusetts, and a Certificate in Training and Development from the University of Maryland.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A traditional annual performance appraisal is the funnel through which employee talent is rewarded or penalized. Through this process, companies and organizations have the opportunity to increase the strength and diversity of their talent pipelines, and ensure success by promoting the strongest employees. This is an equally important process for employees, as it also is a time when their value to the company is validated and when the futures of their careers are determined.

With all of this understood, the fact remains that research in neuroscience has shown the powerful impact unconscious thinking processes can make upon our decisions. Our unintended, unconscious biases can create situations that permit us to make decisions that project our experiences and values onto others. When this sort of thinking is prevalent in talent management processes, it can quickly reduce representational diversity.

This article explains the four domains of bias in performance management: *rater bias*, *self-rater bias*, *structural bias*, and *calibration bias*. Drawing upon a fictional case study based on years of real life consulting experience, we will explore how each bias manifests daily in the workplace, how each bias affects performance management, and how we can mitigate these biases. By addressing and managing biases, organizations can provide equal growth opportunities for persons of all groups and ensure a robust team of employees necessary for success.

A BRIEF CASE STUDY

Stephanie is preparing for her second performance review at Semantics, a global consulting firm. She is pleased with her 15 months at the company, although she sometimes feels intimidated by those who "grew up" with the organization. Even though she has been in consulting for 12 years, she views these Semantics consultants as really top shelf. In re-examining the competencies and contribution areas for her level, and in light of the fact that she has had to scale back to 80 percent time because of her daughter's illness, Stephanie thinks she should fit squarely into "Meets Expectations."

Wilhelm, Stephanie's boss, collected input about Stephanie from her peers and project leads. From them, he learned that Stephanie quickly grasped the Semantics consulting model, had great client relations, was responsible for cross-selling services within another division to the tune of $2.5 million, and had her hand in several significant business development opportunities.

All told, the feedback he received was very positive. The only areas of concern were her speed in bringing to market some innovative modeling ideas, and the fact that her most recent project lead questioned her commitment to the company, given her decision to work part time. Wilhelm himself had been disappointed by her decision to work part time this year. That said, he was the one who encouraged her to do so because he felt it was the right thing to do, especially with her husband on active military duty. However, now that the firm really needs her on the Lunar Steel account, Wilhelm has to scale someone else up quickly, putting more work on his plate.

Wilhelm was leaning toward rating Stephanie as "Above Expectations" until he reviewed her self-assessment and met with her one-on-one. In the review, they discussed Lunar Steel and the status of some business development opportunities that were slow to close. He skirted any conversation about her career development opportunities because he did not want to put more pressure on her given her situation at home. Besides, he felt that Stephanie seemed anxious to end the meeting. Afterward, in reflecting on the year, he could feel the pressure to fit his associates into a normal distribution, which was very difficult because he had a lot of stars. He decided not to push for her promotion.

During a review meeting in which all the division directors discussed their consultants' ratings, Wilhelm gave a synopsis of Stephanie's review and his recommendation. Bill, one of Stephanie's client leads this year, chimed in and said she was incredibly focused, dedicated, productive, and came in under budget while significantly growing her project. He was surprised she was not being considered for an "Above Expectations" rating.

Wilhelm noted that she recently went part time. They moved on to the next candidate, Frans, another German who had worked with Wilhelm for the past 4 years, who easily reached his "Above Expectations" rating without discussion, and then onto the next.

This fictitious case study that discusses the four domains of bias is based on a number of situations revealed over the past three years by Cook Ross clients. We know that in virtually every client service system, fulfilling a business strategy requires a finely honed and diverse employee base that reliably exceeds the expectations of customers, vendors, and strategic partners. Only with a broad, robust talent management pipeline and an intentionally unbiased leadership development selection process is this success possible across organizational functions and levels. One of the most important indicators of pipeline strength is the extent to which the organization is aware of biases in the performance management process.

One of the most important indicators of pipeline strength is the extent to which the organization is aware of biases in performance management.

Many global organizations openly claim that the profile and demographics of their entry level population are a direct reflection of their desire to cultivate diversity. As we know, this mix diminishes greatly over time, often after just a few years. Performance reviews that do not objectively reflect employee contributions are one of the main obstacles to retaining under-represented groups. When the performance review process is out of balance, opportunities for advancement narrow and in turn, narrow an organization's diversity pipeline.

There are many dimensions to a performance review. Within each dimension there are just as many opportunities for bias, both negative and positive. Yet bias, in either positive or negative form, can compromise the objectivity of reviews and have real impact upon employee careers as well as the capacity of the company. Thus, all approaches to managing performance can benefit from the exploration of the impact of bias in performance management and career development.[1] When an organization actively addresses its biases, it sends an important signal to a diverse workforce that real development and advancement opportunity is available. This paper will utilize the case study above to discuss the following four forms of bias:

- Manager or rater bias
- Self-rater bias
- Structural bias
- Calibration bias

We will explore each bias, understand its manifestations and consequences, and identify mitigation strategies.

1 Although some organizations have innovative and potentially effective mechanisms for growing talent other than through an annual review (i.e., on-going coaching models, career dialogues with employees, etc.), this paper will focus on the traditional review process.

UNCONSCIOUS BIAS AND TALENT MANAGEMENT

Based on cognitive neuroscience research from the last 20 years, we know that the basis of our biases is formed from our life experiences, culture, background, and exposures. These biases manifest as automatic thinking that originate from our unconscious mind. Not only do all humans have biases, but we also need them to survive.[2] However, cognitive neuroscience research has taught us that most decisions we make, especially regarding people, are "alarmingly contaminated" by our biases.[3] These biases create a perspective in which we see others as compared to, or as projections of, ourselves. Thus, our biases have profound influence over our decision-making, and get in the way of us seeing others as *they* are.

Recognizing our biases, both positive and negative, is equivalent to committing to a higher level of thinking. Generally, most of us do not access this higher level of awareness because:

- We may not be aware of the difference between automatic and conscious thinking
- We have too much to do, are distracted, and take shortcuts in the decision making process

It takes intention and awareness to recognize that our biases may give us an inaccurate view of others. Yet this intention is crucial to the performance review process. A fair review with meaningful career development coaching is a critical step that can either launch or shortcut a career. It is because of these broad personal and organizational implications that we must account for the powerful impact of our biases.

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RATER BIAS

Much of the global research on bias is focused on gender. Although the principles expressed here are applicable to any number of identity related issues, we will use this study as a means to understand how bias manifests daily in the workplace and influences the careers of those affected. An Australian consulting firm, UGM Consulting explored why so few women advanced to the top of Australian organizations.[4] In observing in-person performance reviews between men, compared to between men and women, the researchers found that:

2 Howard J. Ross, *ReInventing Diversity: Transforming Organizational Community to Strengthen People, Purpose, and Performance*, (Lanham, Md.: Rowan and Littlefield, 2011).

3 JoAnn Moody, *Rising Above Cognitive Errors: Improving Searches, Evaluations, and Decision Making*. 2010. http://www.DiversityOnCampus.com.

4 UGM Consulting, Sydney, Australia, August 2010. http://www.ugmconsulting.com/UGM%20Briefing%20Aug%206%202010%20How%20Unconscious%20Bias%20can%20contaminate%20%20Performance%20Reviews.pdf

- Reviews between men were likely to be collegial, relaxed, focused on the future, and used the pronoun “we”
- Reviews between men and women with men as the manager were more focused on performance and less on career development, and used the pronoun “you”

The UGM study discussed how the rater unconsciously approached reviews with greater comfort when conversing with employees of the same gender than those of the opposite, and how that ultimately impacted the rating and the employees’ advancement.

There are other ways in which a rater’s bias can affect the outcome of a performance review. For example, the manager might not feel comfortable with the review process. This may be attributed to their discomfort with giving feedback, personality differences between the manager and the employee, or simply because the manager was distracted during the review process. No matter the reason, the review will disadvantage the one being rated, and both the employee as well as the group with the associated stereotype may receive “penalties” that impact them personally.

Conversely, when positive bias is at work, the manager may take shortcuts and tilt the bias toward individuals they perceive as more like themselves, as happened between Wilhelm and Frans. In those cases, the employee gets the benefit of the doubt in terms of both performance and potential. These occurrences, if habitual, can severely narrow the diversity of a company’s pipeline. Both positive and negative scenarios are equally problematic, especially when the calibration system in place reinforces these biases.

Let us examine rater bias in the context of our introductory case study. Wilhelm was disappointed with Stephanie’s decision to work part time. He projected his experience upon her sales record and believed her manner of building client relationships did not produce the results he could have produced with his approach. He did not consider the fact that while Stephanie’s style was different, her approach might better match that of her clients, and could ultimately produce outcomes equal or superior to his own. Thus, when Wilhelm rated Stephanie’s approach with clients, he focused on process rather than result, and projected negatively onto her based on negative bias.[5]

5 A reverse projection also can make an impact. A reviewer can have a positive bias toward a particular work style, and project it onto the employee. This would similarly skew the review, but in a positive direction. Positive bias is as problematic as negative bias, especially if it gives a “like” person an advantage, as was lightly explored with Frans.

Now let us look at the cause-and-effect dynamics of our story with more insight into the experiences and motives that were influencing Wilhelm's perspective:

> *Experience:* Wilhelm is disappointed with Stephanie's part time work schedule.
>
> *Cause:* He wants more productivity from Stephanie. Even though he thinks encouraging her to work part time is the right thing to do, the idea of her doing so causes some resentment and discomfort within himself. He is reminded of his own struggles and inner conflicts that occurred when he took care of his mother when she was ill.[6]
>
> *Effect:* Wilhelm's discomfort with Stephanie's personal situation causes him to imagine or project that Stephanie is anxious for the meeting to end. The meeting is cut short, and Stephanie loses an opportunity to have a vital career development conversation. As a result, Stephanie feels less valued. She suspects that her personal situation will keep her from advancing at Semantics. She refrains from asking Wilhelm for time to discuss career options and goals.

Stereotyping is one of the most pernicious cognitive errors in the review process.

Stereotyping is one of the most pernicious cognitive errors in the review process. Our clients have often told us they experience tensions with their employees during performance reviews, and not because specific persons were actively discriminated against. More often, these instances of perceived incompetence and negative evaluation were caused by the unconscious yet automatic judgments that were made by the rater during, or even before, the actual review. These biases, if unchecked and unexplored, will continue to reinforce the status quo and continue to influence talent decisions beyond the review period.

MITIGATING RATER BIAS

Raters must engage themselves to recognize any potential bias well before the review process begins. Recognizing our biases and their power over our decision-making gives us the opportunity to pause, question, and reassess our decisions so we may strive for objectivity. Managers with deciding power over the diversity pipeline as well as the potential career paths of employees are especially responsible for managing their biases.

For every decision made in the performance management process, whether it involves giving ratings, providing feedback, or having a career development conversation, it is essential that the manager ask him or herself:

6 This could happen whether he took time off to take care of her, or he did not, and felt as if he should have done so.

- What kind of biases have I experienced myself? How has that affected me?
- What part of my own agenda is being served by this decision?
- Does this employee or their situation remind me of someone else? Is that association applicable to this situation?
- Are there differences in work style or approach between me and the person I am evaluating? If so, are they wrong, or just different? Might they yield the same results? Can these differences influence my rating of the employee?
- What do I imagine are this employee's career development aspirations? Is this what I imagine, or what he or she has told me?
- What strategies and tactics can I put in place to engage fully and consciously, putting my filters aside?

Answering these questions honestly will provide the manager with insight into his or her own biases, and how they affect decisions in the performance review process.

In addition to priming oneself prior to a performance review, we know from brain research that repeated performance of an action helps the brain create a pattern, and then habituates processes. If the rater considers his or her own assumptions and biases, creates a thoughtful process to analyze assumptions about an employee, and applies the process to performance reviews, with time, it may become an automatic pattern. When we relegate a less biased review process to the automatic part of our brain, we ensure that we are committing to a more routinely objective process.

To summarize:

- Know your biases and identify them before the review begins.
- When soliciting input from others about an individual's review, explore views that are opposite from your own. Adopt an open mind and a sense of inquiry rather than automatically dismissing or discounting opposing views.
- Check your assumptions prior to the conversation, especially those concerning work style and other differences.
- Give performance reviews the importance they deserve. Remember that haste and distractions make for unnecessary negative impacts.
- Use a performance management assessment aid to guide to the process.[7]

Give performance reviews the importance they deserve. Remember that haste and distractions make for unnecessary negative impacts.

7 Please contact the author to request a sample of a performance management assessment guide at: lookingforanswers@cookross.com

SELF-RATER BIAS

When considering the role of bias in performance reviews, we tend to think first of rater bias. It is natural to assume that the bias of the reviewer is solely responsible for the outcome of the evaluation. While rater bias is certainly a key contributor, self-rater bias can be equally damaging to a company's diversity pipeline and an employee's future.

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Self-rater bias occurs when an individual's self evaluation in performance management is not objectively based on accomplishments, and their own self image is reflected in their self-rating. Like rater bias, this type of bias can manifest in both positive and negative ways. Misrepresentation in the self-rating of performance management also can potentially skew an evaluation.

Skewed self perception can cause weakness in the talent pipeline. In UGM's study, researchers found that when women were not equally represented in the workplace and not equally recognized for their accomplishments, they may have unconsciously incorporated those social cues into their evaluations of themselves. The study's results provide important insight into how a company's environment may reinforce power dynamics, and subsequently be translated to affect both employee self assessment and performance ratings.

In our story, Stephanie compares herself to other consultants who have been at Semantics longer. She acknowledges they are "top shelf" and measures her worth against their merits. Although she has a very large contract that is about to come to fruition, and has had a very successful year in which she cross-sold $2.5 million in services, Stephanie gives herself a "Meets Expectations" rating because she focuses on her need to scale back to 80 percent time due to her daughter's illness. In her mental model, working 80 percent does not qualify for more than a "Meets Expectation," even if her actual results may suggest otherwise.

In this story, Wilhelm was considering an "Above Expectations" rating for Stephanie, but it could be that he was influenced by Stephanie's lower self-rating. In the course of this exchange, not only did Stephanie lose a chance to advance her career, but her team may have lost an opportunity to have her as a leader. This is one of many possible consequences that occur when an employee does not accurately see his or her accomplishments, even when others do.

MITIGATING SELF-RATER BIAS

It is difficult to see ourselves accurately. Bias is much easier to identify in other people than in ourselves. In order to reduce the negative repercussions of self-rater bias, we must first understand our own tendencies in this area. For example, some individuals have a strong cultural and personal aversion to self promotion, especially in collectivistic cultures. A self-rater with this aversion may have received family or cultural messages about not boasting, not standing out, promoting the group over the individual, and not taking credit for other people's work. Conversely, other familial or cultural environments may condition individuals to take ownership of their accomplishments and communicate them as part of their identity.

Cultural messages such as these can profoundly pattern how we interpret our contributions and how we measure our value. Understanding the role that background plays in shaping how we see ourselves and our work is a crucial step toward a more objective system of evaluation for both the rater and the self-rater. Both the rater and self-rater must be aware of their bias tendencies prior to the review so they can objectively evaluate the performance.[8]

Finally, a rater consciously committed to fairness, objectivity, and equity in the rating process may coach under-raters and over-raters with objective evidence to develop realistic self perceptions. The rater could benefit from examining whether the employee accurately represents him or herself. Additionally, it may help if the rater has an objective comparison so a minority group employee's annual accomplishments are benchmarked against those of his or her majority group counterpart.[9]

To summarize:

- Recognize that our self-ratings are based on a combination of our personality, our culture, and our gender norms. We may have as much trouble seeing ourselves and our accomplishments objectively as we do seeing those of others.
- Raters should be conscious of the potential cultural or gender differences in self-rating and look for accurate means of comparing accomplishments. Raters can ask themselves: What biases have I seen in my associate's self evaluations?
- Understand that employees can both overrate and underrate. Both can be damaging. If we tend to be judgmental about ourselves, we may tend to underrate. This can be especially true of people in the non-dominant group.
- Raters can avoid the influence of self-rater bias on performance reviews by exercising practices of objectivity, such as cross-comparing members of majority and minority groups.
- Understand that self-rating may influence the manager's rating.

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8 For example, it may be helpful to determine a preliminary rating prior to seeing a self-evaluation before allowing it to inadvertently affect the outcome. Should the self-evaluation result in a change in the rating, as in Wilhelm's case, individuals must be careful to examine the role bias prior to making the change, and take the employee's own possible biases into consideration.

9 It may help objectivity, for example, to benchmark a woman and her annual performance against that of at least one of male peers.

STRUCTURAL BIAS

Beyond the biases that reside in individuals, biases that are found in and reinforced by the organizational structure also can be detrimental to the strength of a diverse talent pipeline. Although many of these structural inequities are unintentional, they nevertheless can have a very real and profound influence on the daily realities and career paths of affected employees.

Every organization has a rating model by which people at different levels are measured. This rating model is typically based on leadership and individual contributor competencies that have been developed and tested in the organization over time. The best rating models are inclusive of different styles of leadership and delivery, are measurable and objective, and are tested on a diversity of employees in the organization. These models provide the structure and framework within which performance management occurs.

In UGM's study of gender in performance management, researchers found that when women do not get to "show up" and have their presence felt in meetings with peers and leaders, their absence is translated negatively in their performance ratings. Research on competency models shows that these models have tended to over-represent more masculine leadership characteristics and under-represent more feminine characteristics.[10] When an organizational structure favors characteristics of one group over another, these favoritisms are expressed in performance reviews as micro-inequities.

Research on competency models shows that these models have tended to over-represent more masculine leadership characteristics and under-represent more feminine characteristics.

One particular structural disadvantage that women experience is the stigma that comes with taking leave. Although work-life choices tend not to be identified as a competency in leadership models, this action may be negatively interpreted through the lens of organizational commitment, decisiveness, people management, or any other leadership competency.

Please note that sometimes men also are subject to negative interpretation when they take some kind of family leave. In our case study, Stephanie received criticism for her decision to go part time. Although her decision was made because her daughter was ill, we see structural bias come into play. Even though Wilhelm, as Stephanie's manager, encouraged her to scale back her hours because her husband was on active military duty, he nevertheless used Stephanie's decision to work part time as one of the reasons (whether his thinking was conscious or not) to not give her a higher rating. This reason was accepted by the team as sufficient to deny Stephanie a higher rating during the calibration as well. Stephanie, on the receiving end of negative structural bias, was then penalized for her choice despite her comparable, if not excellent, achievements.

10 Cascading Gender Biases. Catalyst. 2009. http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/cascading-gender-biases-compounding-effects-assessment-talent-management-systems.

Structural bias can affect talent management not only in the groups it limits, but also in the groups it enables. In our experience with our clients, we have observed repeatedly that women are more likely to underrate on self assessments while men more likely to overrate. Women tend to give more credit to their team, and men may unconsciously take personal credit for the team's work. While this appears to be fundamentally based on hormonal differences between the sexes[11], other factors that differentiate a minority group from a majority group may have similar impacts upon an individual's self assessment. Structural bias, by accepting these micro-inequities as norms, allows unconscious selecting of certain groups to take place. Consequentially, the continual selection of favored individuals encourages homogeneity and obstructs the performance management process as a whole.

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To this end, leaders must explore the cultural inclusivity of both their competency model and contribution models. In the case of gender, men and women both measure themselves against these models and use them as the basis for their self evaluation. Raters do the same. If the competency model values competencies that are innately skewed toward men (or the dominant culture), women (or members of the non-dominant culture) will either try to adopt those majority group behaviors and risk inauthenticity, or they could receive lower ratings than men. Such is the case for all minority and majority group dynamics. Both the owners of the competency models and the raters must take this into account.

MITIGATING STRUCTURAL BIAS

During performance reviews, the rater may have limited input regarding the rating areas, the competency models behind them, and the established weightings. However, they may be able to encourage a fair and equitable system by stimulating conversation about objective congruity between peers on weighting. They can ask probing questions about leadership competencies that may be based on a homogeneous picture of what leaders look like.

It is incumbent upon the work unit and the organization overall to bring clarity to the weighting of contribution areas in order to ensure that their evaluation is equivalent for employees across the organization. For example, consider an organization that has rating areas about profitability, effective running of business units, building culture, and developing people. Clarity and transparency about the relative importance of each will ensure greater equity in performance reviews, especially in the calibration process.

Additionally, the work unit and organization must question whether the values that get reflected in these contribution areas contain any kind of inherent gender or cultural bias. For example, men tend to have more opportunities to develop their skills in running profit and loss (P&L) centers and business

11 Louann Brizendine, *The Female Brain* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007).

operations. If these skill sets are highly valued and weighted heavily, there can be a fundamental structural bias against women. The same must be examined for ethnic minorities or other non-dominant groups.

In anticipation of these biases during performance reviews with colleagues and managers, it is useful to calibrate the weightings of the rating areas and discuss as a collective to ensure alignment. Some inquires could include:

- On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest, to what extent is each area valued during the performance process?
- What is our commitment to short and long-term organizational benefit? How are these reflected in the rating areas?
- Do any of our rating areas seem to favor one gender or cultural leadership style over another?
- Do any of our organizational memes have us weigh one of the rating areas over another?

When you see or experience reviews that represent a different weighting than the one you collectively agreed upon, discuss how to approach your leaders to remind them of those agreements. As much as possible, these personal biases should be exposed during the discussion in order to untangle the biases of the organizational structure, thereby reducing the impact they might have on the performance review process.

To summarize:

- Have clear and transparent rating areas and weighting processes. When unmanaged, personal preferences of leaders as to which contribution areas are most important become part of the structural bias.
- Understand that every organization has an image of a leader. Structural inequities can reinforce this image through biased competency models and contribution areas, penalizing non-dominant groups.
- Leaders must evaluate whether or not their competency models are inclusive.
- All members must clearly understand how the rating areas are weighted in the final evaluation, and whether everyone weights them equally.
- Identify any gender or cultural biases that are inherent in the organization and how they may be impacting the objectivity of the reviews.
- Expose these structural biases prior to performance reviews and continually address them throughout the review process.

Understand that every organization has an image of a leader.

CALIBRATION BIAS

Performance reviews are processes through which employees are provided feedback on their work, and are acknowledged and rewarded for their accomplishments. Often, due to limited resources, a calibration process is put in place in order to create a curve in which a limited number of people can be at the top. Since compensation is often tied to ratings, it must fit into a pre-established line item. In order to determine the recipients of such compensation, organizations review groups of people to determine their ratings relative to each other. The comparative nature of calibration, and the group decision process that accompanies it, can further cause bias in the pipeline. So how does Stephanie compare to Frans? Does she, or he, deserve to be "Above Expectations?"[12] The following items can create dynamics in calibration meetings where bias can affect decisions. These domains are as much about the candidates as they are about the decision makers and how decisions are influenced.

The comparative nature of calibration, and the group decision process that accompanies it, can further cause bias in the pipeline.

- Personality or level dominance
- Known or unknown candidates
- Work style
- Tenure
- Different interpretations of the standards
- Different rating tendencies of the career counselors
- Structural bias (discussed previously)
- Unconscious quotas

Without conscious awareness, decisions can be influenced by the person(s) in the group who have power by simple virtue of position or personality, as happened with Wilhelm and Frans. When these meetings happen quickly, have a lot of people involved, and happen without a clearly established meeting and decision protocol, calibration decisions may also tend to favor the dominant group. This power dynamic makes it pivotal for leaders to own and address their biases as their position often allows their preferences to take precedent, even if there is a group consensus otherwise.

In our case study, Wilhelm was in such a position of influence and power. More than just Stephanie's manager, he had influence during the calibration meeting. When Bill questioned Wilhelm's decision on Stephanie's promotion, his dissenting opinion was quickly passed over in favor of Wilhelm's. Yet when Frans came up in the calibration meeting, he achieved an "Above Expectations" rating without discussion. While we do not know Frans' qualifications relative to Stephanie's, they still must be considered when such decisions happen without further discussion, even when opposing viewpoints are brought to the table.

12 The same dynamic should be considered in the succession planning conversation when candidates are compared to each other.

MITIGATING CALIBRATION BIAS

The first step to mitigating bias in calibration meetings is to acknowledge calibration bias and to make a commitment to addressing it where it may arise. One way to do this is to begin the calibration meeting with a verbal, stated commitment to equity and fairness. Reading such a statement reminds the group participants of the potential impact of bias and the commitment of the company to inclusion. It also puts this commitment front and center in their minds, and focuses the group on the importance of the decisions they are making. To ensure that the message is conveyed and received, ask the person with the position or personality dominance to read the statement.[13]

Second, encourage members to note their biases as they are comparing and evaluating candidates. Distribute bias "capture" worksheets to everyone on the call or meeting, and walk through how to use the sheets.[14] Please note that these are one-time use items and should be destroyed after the meeting to ensure anonymity and encourage authenticity. Their primary purpose is to encourage the private identification of bias in the process. Once biases are consciously acknowledged, it becomes easier to make a decision that is less dominated by that bias and is more objective.

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Finally, it is important to establish decision and discussion norms prior to the call or meeting. Some examples of meeting norms could be:

- All voices must be heard on decisions, either verbally through polling or through a written process.
- Dissenting voices are invited and encouraged. One approach to offering a dissenting view is to say: "I hear and appreciate everything being said, though I have a different experience of this candidate."
- When statements are made about a candidate that seem like they are opinion and not objective, members should be encouraged to say something such as, "I appreciate that point of view. Do you or anyone have objective data to support that?"
- Make overall process observations around trends in comments toward different groups. Say something such as, "It seems all of the new experienced hires [women, minorities, etc.] are assessed [in a particular way]. Can we talk about why that might be the case?"

Using bias management techniques in meetings and operations prior to the calibration meeting can condition group members to understand and gain awareness of their biases. One global accounting firm has been experimenting with this by asking someone outside of the decision group to play this process

13 If you would like to see a sample statement, please contact the author at: lookingforanswers@cookross.com

14 To learn more about bias "capture" worksheets, please contact the author at: lookingforanswers@cookross.com

role. It may benefit the conversation to ask someone to play a process role so as to ensure that all voices are heard, and none dominates.

If an organization addresses and manages bias before and during performance management and calibration meetings, both as individuals and as a group, there can be room for discussions of diversity and objectivity to ensure fairness in the talent pipeline.

To Summarize:

- Even if self-rater, rater, and structural bias are mitigated, calibration bias could bring back the biases of all members of the committee.
- Having a clearly defined process for identifying and discussing bias throughout the calibration process will yield a more objective comparison between people.
- Establishing bias up front as a derailing factor of calibration can put it forefront in people's minds.
- Creating clear norms for discussion and decision-making can help mitigate power dynamics that could interfere with a collaborative decision process.
- Introducing bias management strategies prior to performance reviews allows the normalization of bias awareness, and can assist in the facilitation of objective discussions during the calibration meeting.

Creating clear norms for discussion and decision-making can help mitigate power dynamics that could interfere with a collaborative decision process.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR MITIGATING BIAS?

Performance management is a managerial task that is frequently under-valued and poorly executed. Although some organizations may give this process the seriousness and weighting that it deserves, not all managers will do so, especially because it is time consuming, often has a layer of complexity, and calls managers outside of their comfort zones. In spite of these potential pitfalls, its importance in leveling the playing field for employees outside of the dominant group makes performance management a critical area to focus on when ensuring a diverse pipeline of talent.

Yet whose job is it to mitigate bias? Every manager is responsible for delivering the most objective review possible, and employees are responsible for considering their relationship to self promotion and self evaluating accordingly. Nevertheless, it is the responsibility of the collective leadership community in an organization to recognize the impact of bias on their process, and to collectively commit to mitigating it.

So what of Wilhelm's performance management process? In a more perfect world, Wilhelm would have done the following:

- Recognized that his work style is different than Stephanie's. Once the difference is acknowledged, he would put it aside and focus on results, unless her work style was counter to the values of Semantics.
- Recognized that he was projecting his discomfort with his own situation with his mother onto Stephanie's decision to work part time, and that this should not impact his rating at all.
- Given Stephanie's feedback on her rating, he would have informed her that he felt she underrated herself and why, and what the potential impact of her underrating could be if she continues on that path.
- Wilhelm should not have let his own discomfort, disappointment, or frustration with Stephanie's personal situation get in the way of giving her due time to discuss not only performance, but also career development.
- Encouraged more conversation about her in the calibration meeting, especially with two dissenting opinions. The author is not suggesting that Stephanie clearly was "Above Expectations." The problem was the group's lack of adequate discussion of her rating relative to that of others.
- Given Frans the same level of scrutiny that he gave Stephanie, and not let the group pass over a discussion about him because Wilhelm is perceived as Frans' sponsor.

Stephanie, on the other hand, could have validated her accomplishments against her peers to see whether she was outperforming them. She should not use the 80 percent schedule as a factor in her self assessment, and if she does, she should recognize that it may not be something others are using to measure her achievements. Stephanie should have brought up the next year and career planning, in spite of her feeling shame or embarrassment about her personal situation, and work to understand that these feelings may not be necessary.

Finally, in the calibration meeting, when comments were quickly passed over, someone–or everyone—should have called for a pause in the process to discuss, given their collective commitment to objectivity.

Mitigating bias is everyone's responsibility. A shared recognition that bias exists in every decision and a collective and personal commitment to its reduction are the only antidotes to unchecked bias hijacking all of our critical decisions.

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8630 Fenton Street, Suite 824, Silver Spring, MD 20910

www.cookross.com
301.565.4035

Questions or comments?
Please contact lookingforanswers@cookross.com