What Your Performance Reviews Might Be Missing: Uncovering Hidden Gender Bias



Performance reviews are one of the most powerful tools HR leaders have to shape career growth and organizational culture. Yet, despite our best intentions, they often reinforce gender biases -subtle or overt – that hold women, trans employees, and non-binary staff back from the opportunities they deserve. Because reviews frequently influence promotions, compensation, and leadership pathways, unchecked bias can perpetuate inequity across your organization.

How Bias Shows Up in Performance Reviews

Bias rarely announces itself, it shows up in patterns. Research shows that women and gender-diverse employees are more likely to receive vague feedback ("You're doing fine") compared to men, who more often get actionable guidance tied to advancement. Trans and non-binary employees often face assumptions about their competence or "fit," leading to undervaluation of their contributions. Bias also shows up when subjective traits like "confidence" or "leadership skills" are prioritized criteria often unconsciously coded as masculine.

The Impact on Promotions and Career Trajectories

When reviews reinforce stereotypes, they don't just damage morale – they derail careers. Women may find themselves consistently overlooked for stretch assignments or leadership roles, even when their results match or exceed their peers. This perpetuates a cycle where certain demographics are underrepresented in senior leadership, reinforcing the perception that they "don't belong" there. HR directors must recognize that fair evaluations are not just a matter of compliance, but a cornerstone of talent retention and equity.

What Managers Can Do Differently

Equity in performance reviews requires intentionality. Managers must be trained to recognize and interrupt bias in their own evaluations. This includes focusing on measurable outcomes rather than personality traits, ensuring feedback is specific and actionable, and calibrating reviews across teams to catch discrepancies. Equally important is creating space for employees to share how workplace culture impacts their performance, particularly for those navigating gendered or transphobic workplace dynamics.

Building a Culture of Accountability

Bias in reviews is not an individual failing – it's a systemic issue. Organizations must track review outcomes by gender identity, race, and other factors to identify patterns of inequity. HR should provide tools, such as standardized evaluation rubrics, and hold leaders accountable for equitable outcomes. Promoting gender equality isn't just about fairness – it strengthens organizations by ensuring you are not overlooking top talent.

Performance Review Equity Checklist

☐**Focus on measurable outcomes:** Base evaluations on results, not subjective impressions.

☐**Use consistent criteria:** Apply the same standards across employees, avoiding vague terms like "leadership presence."

☐**Provide actionable feedback:** Ensure every employee receives clear guidance for growth.

☐**Check for patterns:** Regularly analyze review outcomes across gender and identity groups.

☐**Avoid coded language:** Replace gendered descriptors ("aggressive," "emotional") with behaviour-focused feedback.

☐**Invite self-assessment:** Allow employees to share context and self-advocacy in the process.

☐**Train managers on bias awareness:** Incorporate gender and trans inclusivity into leadership training.

☐**Review promotion readiness fairly:** Audit promotion recommendations for signs of inequity.