

Let's Talk

Author: [therese-huston](#)

Tags: [#feedback](#) [#inclusion](#)

Dialogue

- Let's frame what unconscious bias is.

Making feedback fair across genders:

Specificity of the feedback we're giving, the focus of the feedback, and the consistency of the feedback.

- Managers tend to sugarcoat feedback generally — but for women especially, positive words in performance reviews didn't correlate as much with scores.

~Common Feedback Challenges~

Telling women to "speak up" and some of the ways to address this with a team:

Suggestions:

1. Call on women in the group first.
2. Micro-aggressions list / accountability

I don't know how to tell her she's too aggressive.

Suggestions:

1. Vet your source.
2. If you do give feedback on this, how to frame it. I like what you say in this section:

So I'm not sure if that feedback is fair or unfair, but I wanted you to know it's the impression some people have of you. Then take a tip from the playbook of Sharone Bar-David: "And I want to help you make that negative impression go away."

Also, perhaps we hit on the magic words from Crucial Conversations that you cite:

"I see this as a matter of honesty and integrity, so it's important for me to be clear about where I stand."

"I know it's a risk to speak this assertively, but I'm going to express my opinion very directly."

I'm cornered she'll take it the wrong way.

Protective hesitation — what is this?

Suggestions:

Invoke high standards.

Assure the other person they can reach those high standards.

What if she cries

Suggestions:

Don't ignore.

Ask a question.

"I can see this is stirring some strong emotion. If you don't mind my asking, what's causing the emotion for you?"

"What are you thinking?"

Distinction: Helping someone restore their own control vs. trying to control. The first helps them save face. The second is you trying to avoid discomfort.

Research relating to BIPOC feedback:

Evidently when we're giving feedback to someone who's in the majority in our workplace, we praise their skill and competency, but when we're giving feedback to someone whose face stands out, we spout vague pronouncements about how nice they are to be around.

Quotes

The biggest decisions about your career are often made when you're not in the room. - Davia Temin

The publishing world isn't the only profession where men receive more useful coaching and feedback. Empirical data reveals it happens in law, medicine, technology, and the military, and the list keeps growing. Whatever your industry or gender, it's worth closely examining the role of bias in feedback toward underrepresented and marginalized groups. If you want to be fair and just, if you want to help each member of your team improve and achieve their full potential, then you need to know how and when

you might lean toward some people and away from others. This chapter is largely about gender bias in feedback because it's so well documented, but toward the end of the chapter, I'll also present evidence for racial bias in feedback as well. If you're going to make feedback your superpower, you want everyone to benefit, not just the white men on your team.

The first time I took an unconscious bias test, I was told I was part of the majority of the population that associates men with careers and women with family. I thought, "Well, that's obviously wrong," and immediately retook the test. Same result. I was embarrassed, shocked, and humbled. I travel the country giving talks about unconscious gender bias, and evidently, I'm just as guilty. According to one study of over 380,000 people, 72 percent of adults unconsciously believed that men were better at math and science and that women were better at the humanities, and 76 percent of adults unconsciously associated men with careers and women with family...

Incidentally, if you want to discover your own unconscious biases, you can take what's known as an Implicit Association Test. If you've never taken one before, it's probably the most eye-opening fifteen minutes you'll have all week. A team at Harvard University maintains a website where you can take these tests for free. Go to <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/> and choose from a list of possible topics. There are tests for unconscious bias around weight, race, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation, as well as two tests of gender...

If we want to make feedback fair across genders, we need to watch three things: specificity of the feedback we're giving, the focus of the feedback, and the consistency of the feedback.

Managers unknowingly tend to sugarcoat their feedback to all employees, distorting their comments upward, but they're especially likely to do this for women. Researchers counted the number of times strong positive words such as "excellent" and "awesome" appeared in actual performance reviews. You'd expect such words to be reserved for outstanding employees, and for men, they were. The researchers found that if you're a man and your supervisor described your "superb work" or "impressive handling of clients," you could count on receiving the highest numeric score on the company's rating scale, a 5 out of 5.

But if you were a woman and received that kind of praise, you couldn't count on much. Strong positive language in women's reviews wasn't correlated with their scores. Words like "excellent" and "stellar" were sometimes just hot air. If you're a woman, your supervisor could write how he's "so impressed with your superb work" and still give you a 3 out of 5.

I've interviewed professionals in a variety of industries about their feedback experiences, and certain problems come up again and again when managers are giving feedback to women. Let's take a look at four of the most common feedback challenges:

1. "I don't know how to tell her to speak up."
2. "I don't know how to tell her she's too aggressive."
3. "I'm concerned she'll take it the wrong way."
4. "But what if she cries?"

You'll notice that the first two items concern communication style. That's no coincidence: women are much more likely than men to be told their communication style needs work.

First, try what researchers at the University of Oxford have discovered: call on a woman in the group first. Social scientists examined how men and women participated in meetings in several different countries and found that when a man asked the first question, men dominated the rest of the meeting and a large proportion of the women were silent, but when a woman asked the first question, then women and men participated equally (or, more accurately, in proportion to the number of men and women in the room).

The second strategy is one I learned about from Iris Bohnet, the author of *What Works: Gender Equality by Design*. She was consulting with a law firm where male partners dominated meetings. Bohnet proposed a two-step approach. First, she asked the attorneys to work together to generate a list of microaggressions, those verbal and nonverbal slights that weren't intentionally malicious but that nonetheless discouraged members of underrepresented groups. Generating the list took time, but it made attorneys aware of how their behaviors affect others.

Simply generating the list wasn't enough—old habits, as they say, die hard. The next step was accountability. One of the partners put a pile of small reded flags in the middle of the conference table they used most often. At the start of a meeting, everyone would place a flag in front of them. When someone committed one of these microaggressions, a person could raise their flag. The law firm discovered that most people raised red flags on themselves, bringing humor to their meetings and to this otherwise uncomfortable issue. After a few meetings, microaggressions had dropped dramatically, and in some instances, people simply had to start reaching for their flag for someone to apologize. Women took their share of the floor. It worked because team members, not the manager or partner leading the meeting, policed themselves.

So the question to ask is "Women are being too aggressive compared to what?" It could be compared to men. Perhaps men exhibit better soft skills at work or have mastered

the right tone. Maybe. But the data suggests that if anything, male managers tend to have more problems with interpersonal skills than female managers do.

“I want you to be as successful as you can be. You’re quick to think on your feet, and you’re more on top of the data than anyone else. I value all of that. But there is a trade-off in your communication style. I want you to know that you sometimes come off as aggressive. I’m concerned that perception means some people will avoid working with you.” Then you can explain how you’ve been educating yourself about unconscious gender bias (reading this fabulous book called *Let’s Talk*), and you know there’s a double standard such that when men communicate a certain way, it’s seen as leadership, but when women do the same thing, it’s seen as aggressive. “So I’m not sure if that feedback is fair or unfair, but I wanted you to know it’s the impression some people have of you.” Then take a tip from the play-book of Sharone Bar-David: “And I want to help you make that negative impression go away.”

I worry that the number of male managers avoiding difficult conversations with women is, if anything, on the rise. The [#MeToo](#) movement has changed the way men interact with women, which has improved working conditions for women overall, but it’s also made many male managers more cautious. Being more mindful of how you have these conversations is wise, but it shouldn’t mean that you skip hard performance conversations altogether.

Thankfully, researchers have found ways to structure a critical feedback conversations so that the recipient is less likely to attribute your feedback to bias and more likely to feel motivated. You want to do two things: you want to invoke high standards, and you want to assure the other person you believe she can reach those high standards.

So what should you do if you’re telling someone she hasn’t received a promotion or her work isn’t meeting expectations, and she begins to cry? First of all, don’t pretend that nothing is happening. Some managers keep talking as though nothing’s changed, and that’s invalidating. (As we saw in chapter 4, validation makes all the difference.) Instead, reach for a box of Kleenex and set it on the table between you. She’s probably worried she appears incompetent, so I usually say something like, “I have strong emotions too sometimes,” or “Take your time. If feelings were forbidden, I wouldn’t work here.” When she’s calmed herself, ask what prompted the tears. It could be she’s upset by your feedback, or it could be she’s overwhelmed in another part of her life. If the pressure has been building up, crying releases it. So start with a question:

- “I can see this is stirring some strong emotion. If you don’t mind my asking, what’s causing the emotion for you?”
- “How did that land?”

- “What do you want me to know?”
- “What are you thinking?”

That last one might seem odd—shouldn't you be asking about feelings, not thoughts?—but Dave Stachowiak, the host of the extremely popular podcast *Coaching for Leaders* offers that tip from his years of working at Dale Carnegie. He's found when someone is overcome by their feelings, that person can more readily collect themselves if they focus on thoughts, not feelings.

Another study of 667 bank employees in the United Kingdom surfaced similar results. In that context, Asian and Black employees were both in the minority, and both of those underrepresented groups received significantly more comments in their annual performance reviews about their interpersonal and social skills than their white peers. Evidently when we're giving feedback to someone who's in the majority in our workplace, we praise their skill and competency, but when we're giving feedback to someone whose face stands out, we spout vague pronouncements about how nice they are to be around.

Prepared by Dave Stachowiak of CoachingforLeaders.com