



Performance Management

Use of Biased Language in Annual Reviews

Performance reviews, without careful design and governance, are often a trap for unconscious bias. Look for common language patterns that provide clues that evaluations are not as objective as intended.

In a recent survey, when asked to describe an employee's accomplishments, the responses uncovered examples of unconscious bias that is disguised through non-specific and gendered language:



Male employees receive more specific “work-related” feedback

Surveys for positive language used more often for men – describing them as *analytical and competent*.



Female employees receive 1.4 times more “personality-based” feedback

Surveys found managers used more negative language for women, like *selfish, inept, and aggressive*

The research found that in 81,000 performance evaluations, work performance collected for women becomes less about their skill set, and more about personality characteristics such as *niceness* and having *commitment* to spend long hours in the office. Often, women are expected to be *nice* and *emotionally manage others*, all the while having to provide more evidence of their competence than their male peers.

Another study found in the 248 reviews in the tech industry examined, *abrasive* was used seventeen times to describe thirteen women but not a single time for a man.

It also found when men are described as *abrasive* it is often framed as something that we should expect of strong leaders and talented individuals.

Women's *abrasiveness*, at least in the context of tech performance reviews, is framed as a problem, something to be corrected, or worse something to be punished, not something to be accepted.