



## 6 Tips to Help Minimise Bias

1. Ensure that any capability, talent or leadership frameworks you use are developed on the basis of a representative sample of men and women.
2. Check that all criteria and their associated behavioural indicators apply equally to men and women, and are free of stereotypical assumptions or language.
3. Check that any position descriptions or job profiles are free of bias and relate to performance.
4. Review where self-assessment and peer-assessment can be added to manager assessment, so that ratings from various sources can flag discrepancies.
5. Check that all steps in the process are clear and unambiguous: there is less scope for bias when the need for inference and subjective discretion are reduced.
6. Train all managers and staff to interpret criteria in agreed ways and to become alert to the potential for unconscious bias to affect interpretation, especially when leadership potential is being assessed. This training needs to be updated regularly.

## HOW UNCONSCIOUS BIAS CAN CONTAMINATE PERFORMANCE REVIEWS

### *The manager as gatekeeper*

In research conducted over six years, we explored why relatively few women progress from the middle to the top of Australian organisations. Our discussions with senior women generally ended up focusing on two issues: securing more of a share of the talking time in regular meetings and ensuring better recognition for good performance. Doing excellent work was not enough, it was claimed: women have to make sure their work gets recognised and rewarded.

If demonstrating your capability through influential contributions in regular meetings constitutes the first ‘critical site’ where leadership potential is identified, then successfully managing the performance appraisal discussion is definitely the second! When someone meets with their manager to talk about their successes and failures during the past six or twelve months, they can’t change those events but they can and do influence how they are evaluated. For example, will partial success in a recent project be judged as evidence of failure or as a developmental milestone? How will the manager assess what’s happened and what role will the employee’s skill in managing this important meeting play in that assessment? In this intimate, intense dialogue both people will speak, and both will, at times, be listeners: they will co-construct the outcome.

In an appraisal meeting, the manager is, in effect, a *gatekeeper* who controls access to valuable resources, such as recognition and the rewards of coaching, development, bonus and promotion. The employee, for their part, must manage rapport, create the right impression and conduct themselves in an appropriately assertive manner. We wanted to know if men and women handle these challenges differently and whether bias creeps in.

### *Secrecy*

Filming such meetings proved difficult because of the sensitivities involved in recording a situation where someone is being assessed. Yet this in itself became a motivator: there is secrecy around what happens, with individual team members unaware of exactly how their manager conducts an appraisal meeting with their *other* colleagues! Given that there are generally more men than women at senior levels, we wanted to know if male managers tend to interact with their male and female staff differently and, if they do, what is the effect of this difference in determining leadership potential. Does unconscious bias influence how different team members are perceived?

The conventional wisdom is that ‘merit’ is a neutral principle, applied without bias to evaluate competence and assess suitability. People are appraised on their job-related capabilities through a

systematic process, uncontaminated by personal preference or inclination. Unfortunately, we found clear indications that the merit principle is not always understood or applied rigorously. Gendered assumptions can creep in unconsciously at multiple points.

### *Subjectivity, trust and rapport*

Criteria can be open to subjective interpretation or, during the appraisal process, factors other than performance may be called into play and influence a manager’s judgment. A meeting we filmed illustrated this. Geoff meets with his team member, Peter, to agree on his performance rating and discuss career development. Geoff spends only a brief time reviewing Peter’s performance and, indeed, his leading questions and helpful ideas for Peter ensure Peter need make little effort in the meeting. Geoff suggests, for instance, the career move Peter should make next. His frequent use of the word “we” indicates solidarity and rapport. There is a sense that Geoff and Peter are comfortable in each others’ company, think about things the same way and trust each other.

Research has shown that a motivator in organisational decision-making is minimising uncertainty. Where identifying future leaders is concerned, this means managers can be inclined to choose people who most resemble themselves. People often prefer to work with people they trust and with whom they feel some rapport. The riskier the business environment, the more risky it is to appoint ‘others’.

When Geoff meets with another of his direct reports, Ann-Marie, his approach is significantly different. The overall balance of the meeting is weighted towards a very detailed review of her performance, with relatively little time spent on her future development or career aspirations. Ann-Marie has to defend her record in a way not required of Peter. This conversation is tougher and far less relaxed!

The pressure to blend into the prevailing workplace culture has led to a view by many men *and* women that the chief task of female employees is to refashion themselves along more stereotypically male lines. But if other obstacles to progress, such as unconscious bias, are not addressed, women may find that even when they do obey the ‘rules’ and behave assertively, they may not be evaluated in the same way as their male colleagues. Women can fail by not changing (and so appearing too personal or feminine) and also by changing (and so appearing too abrasive or masculine). When different discourse systems clash, it is the dominant one which is seen as the norm and those who deviate risk being assessed as less capable. The data we collected indicate that difference is not always valued. Bias can affect who gets heard and who gets ahead.