

Implicit Bias in Staff Performance Evaluations

This guide is intended to support faculty and staff interested in intentionally disrupting implicit bias when completing staff performance evaluations.

Implicit or unconscious bias refers to the information, attitudes, and stereotypes that affect how we process information subconsciously. Implicit biases surface when situations trigger mental reactions that influence our behavior. Implicit biases are not related to our conscious intentions, yet they can affect the way we form judgments about one another and how we evaluate an individual's performance.

How Can Implicit Bias Affect How I Complete Staff Performance Evaluations?

- “Performance appraisal is a process by which humans judge other humans.”¹ While we all strive to be as meritocratic as possible, our biases are more likely to surface when we are asked to make gut-level, largely subjective assessments.²
- Our biased assumptions of what appropriate workplace behavior looks like can vary depending on the demographic characteristics of our colleagues.

Ex.: One study found that persons of color and white women were far more likely to have their personality traits, both positive and negative, mentioned in their evaluations. This seems to suggest that “likeability” is considered more important for white women and people of color.³

- **Cognitive Bias** can manifest as the tendency to judge more critically members of groups stereotyped as less competent (e.g. women, people of color, individuals with disabilities, older employees, LGBT+, and professionals from blue-collar backgrounds).³

Ex.: A new hire of color initially struggled to meet performance expectations after replacing a staff member with more experience. Even after a year in the job, the person of color is still given hyper-critical feedback when adequately performing tasks.

- **Similarity Bias** occurs when we use character to explain negative behavior from members of our “Out Group”, and use situational factors to explain the same behavior from a member of our “In Group”.⁴

Ex.: When a peer of a different race or gender misses a deadline it seems to be because they are “lazy” or not working hard enough. However, when a peer of our own race or gender misses a deadline, it seems to be because they are “over-tasked” or having a bad day.

- **Recency or Distance Bias** is the tendency to place too much emphasis on one's most recent experiences.⁴

Ex.: When a colleague's recent mistake overshadows their track record of consistent thoughtful work product.



How Can I Disrupt Implicit Bias When Completing Performance Evaluations?

Here are five research-based strategies that may help mitigate the influence of implicit bias when completing staff performance evaluations:

1. **Acknowledge the risk of bias clouding assessment.** Before you begin an evaluation of your staffmember, take the time to consider the possibility that you may carry implicit biases. Awareness of implicit bias alone is not enough to disrupt its impact, however, when decision makers become conscious of the potential for prejudice, they often attempt to correct for it.⁵
2. **Reflect before making your assessment.** Make time to document staff performance throughout the year and review your notes before completing your evaluation.⁴ Individuals interested in minimizing the impact of implicit bias on their judgments should actively engage in thoughtful, deliberative reflection before evaluating another's performance.⁷
3. **Look for Similarities.** Humans tend to judge those whom they perceive as different more critically than those whom they perceive as similar to themselves. Find something you have in common with the person you are evaluating before giving feedback or making your assessment.⁴
4. **Be Specific.** Detail what a person said or did using descriptive words (rather than judgment words) as evidence in making your assessment. Focusing on specific information makes the individual more salient in your assessment than the person's social category (e.g., race or gender).⁶
5. **State your reasoning before expressing your opinion.** Clarifying how you formed your conclusion, before stating your position will create an opportunity for self-critique.⁷ Practicing a measure of self-reflection before finalizing and submitting your evaluations can help you avoid the negative effects of implicit bias.

Endnotes:

- 1 Prendergast, C. and Topel, R. (1993). Discretion and Bias in Performance Evaluation. *European Economic Review*, 37, 355-365.
https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/159934/mod_resource/content/1/PT%201993.pdf
- 2 Mackenzie, L. N., Wehner, J. and Correll, S. J. (2019) Why Most Performance Evaluations are Biased and How to Fix Them. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2019/01/why-most-performance-evaluations-are-biased-and-how-to-fix-them>
- 3 Williams, J. C., Loyd, D. L., Boginsky, M., and Armas-Edwards, F. (2021) How One Company Worked to Root Out Bias from Performance Reviews. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2021/04/how-one-company-worked-to-root-out-bias-from-performance-reviews>
- 4 Jones, B., Smith, K., and Rock, D. (2018). Three Biases that Hijack Performance Reviews, and How to Address Them. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2018/06/3-biases-that-hijack-performance-reviews-and-how-to-address-them>
- 5 Green AR, Carney DR, Pallin DJ, Ngo LH, Raymond KL, Iezzoni LI, et al. Implicit bias among physicians and its prediction of thrombolysis decisions for black and white patients. *J Gen Intern Med*. 2007;22(9):1231-8. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-007-0258-5>
- 6 Lebrecht S, Pierce LJ, Tarr MJ, Tanaka JW. Perceptual other-race training reduces implicit racial bias. *PLoS One*. 2009;4(1):e4215. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0004215>
- 7 Casey, P. M. (2012). Helping Courts Address Implicit Bias: Resources for Education. National Center for State Courts. <http://ncsc.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/accessfair/id/246>