

Making Feedback Fair

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ABSTRACT

Do managers give men and women the same kinds of feedback? Evidence suggests they don't. Recent research reveals that women in tech are more likely than men to receive vague positive praise and critiques of their communication style, whereas men receive more feedback on specific skills linked to business outcomes. We'll examine how this might advantage men and strategize giving fair feedback.

AUDIENCE

The primary target audience for this talk will be mid-career professionals who are managers, aspiring managers, team leaders, or senior independent contributors. Although focused on mid-career professionals, this topic is also relevant to women early in their tech careers: more women need to recognize if they're not receiving the feedback they need to succeed.

Tells reviewers who will benefit most from this submission

INTRODUCTION

Why are there so few women managers in tech? According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, women comprised approximately 38% of the managers in the United States in 2015-16, yet only 17.3% of the managers at Microsoft were women during that time (Heer, 2016). Amazon and Apple have done slightly better at 25% and 28% women managers, respectively, but many of these women are in human resources and marketing, not in technical lead roles.

Tech companies often blame the pipeline. "Be patient" they say. The talent pool of qualified programmers is still disproportionately male (Zara, 2016). Managers who blame the pipeline insist that once we have more women job applicants, we'll have more women software developers, and in a few years, those women will be promoted into lead and management roles.

But this argument hinges on the fact that skilled women have the same shot at promotion as skilled men. What if men are better positioned for those promotions than women? What if men have received more concrete feedback that helps them hone their skill set and stand out in performance reviews? In this presentation, I'll present recent research evidence that men and women receive different kinds of feedback on their performance reviews.

We'll examine the most up-to-date research findings available from an ongoing research project at Stanford University's Clayman Institute for Gender Research. Researchers are analyzing performance evaluations from several high-tech companies.

The preliminary findings reveal that women are more likely than men to receive vague feedback. For instance, one analysis of 200 performance reviews at a large tech company showed that 57% of the women received vague praise such as, "You had a great year," or "You really helped our team," whereas only 43% of the men received these vague, generic comments (Correll & Simard, 2016).

But at least it's praise, right? Yes, but it isn't memorable and it doesn't show leadership potential. In contrast, men are more likely to receive concrete, developmental feedback that's linked to business outcomes, such as "Your ability to triage bugs ensured our feature shipped in August," or "We need you to work across the whole stack to make sure that we don't slip this year." Sixty percent of men received these kinds of comments on specific skills linked to business goals, compared to only 40% of women.

There are several reasons why managers might provide more detailed feedback to men, and I'll explain one in this presentation: "protective hesitation" (Thomas, 2001). Giving negative feedback can be uncomfortable; giving negative feedback to someone of a different gender or race can be especially uncomfortable. When people are afraid that the other person will take the feedback in the wrong way, they modify what they say. They avoid specifics and stick with general statements that feel safe, rather than giving specific, actionable feedback that they would give someone of their own gender or race.

Correll and her colleagues at Stanford found another important discrepancy in the feedback that men and women received. When women did receive specific suggestions to improve their performance, managers' comments often focused women's communication style. For instance, 76% of the comments about being "too aggressive" appeared in women's reviews, compared to only 24% in men's (Correll & Simard, 2016). This focus on how women communicate fits previous findings. One researcher examined 248 performance reviews in tech and reported that "abrasive" is one word that appears in performance reviews for women, but not in performance reviews for men (Snyder, 2014).

Effective communication skills are clearly important in leadership roles, but managers are giving women the lion's share of negative feedback on these skills. Instead of focusing on communication skills, managers were more likely to give men helpful critical feedback about a technical skill they could develop, such as "You need to deepen your domain knowledge in the X space – once you have that understanding, you will be able to contribute to the design decisions that impact the customer," (Correll & Simard, 2016, p.2).

This biased feedback gives men an advantage when it's time to decide whom to promote. If managers don't document the specific skills women possess or the business goals these women have helped the team reach, it's difficult for anyone further up the chain of command to make a case that these women have what it takes to lead. And if women haven't been receiving specific feedback on how to improve, they don't have the opportunity to hone their skill set before the next round of promotions.

Individual women can complain about these inequities, but when a single woman speaks out, she invites backlash (Bohnet, 2016). If we're going to reduce gender bias in tech, we need to do it systematically, with managers and directors taking the lead.

There are limitations to this research. At this point, the findings are preliminary and only reflect performance reviews at three tech companies.

What makes this presentation crucial now? Tech companies are revamping performance reviews. Adobe, Dell, Microsoft, and IBM have transformed their appraisal process and other companies are following their lead (Cappelli & Tavis, 2016). Since organizations are already overhauling how they review employees' work, the smartest managers will use this opening to equalize the feedback they give to men and women.

People have talked for years about leveling the playing field. Now let's level how we keep score.

OUTCOMES / CONCLUSION

By the end of the session, attendees will have:

- Reviewed fascinating research findings that illustrate how men and women in tech receive different kinds of feedback on their performance reviews;
- Evaluated how these differences could increase the chances that men are promoted over women;
- Evaluated why such patterns occur, despite an outward commitment by tech companies to promote more women into leadership roles;
- Gathered ideas for systematically reducing gender bias within their own teams and their own communications;
- Gathered ideas for ensuring women have an equal shot at promotion; and
- Received a list of resources so they can learn more

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Zara, C. (2016, Aug. 16). Why so few women managers in tech?

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Bio

Presenter Bio

Bio should not be generic but must pertain to the session.

PARTICIPATION STATEMENT

If my proposal is accepted, I promise I'll be there.

Only speakers listed in the submission form should be listed on the proposal

REFERENCES

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