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Research: Vague Feedback Is Holding Women Back

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Although companies have invested heavily in programs to advance women leaders, the number of women in executive roles has not changed significantly in the last decade. Even if women are well represented as middle managers, their numbers drop off when making the jump to VP-level executives. Why are women not rising to executive ranks?

One reason is the feedback men and women receive along the way. ***Our research shows that women are systematically less likely to receive specific feedback tied to outcomes, both when they receive praise and when the feedback is developmental. In other words, men are offered a clearer picture of what they are doing well and more-specific guidance of what is needed to get to the next level.***

When we analyzed a sample of performance evaluations of men and women across three high-tech companies and a professional services firm, we found that ***women consistently received less feedback tied to business outcomes. The vague feedback lets women know they are generally doing a good job, but it does not identify which specific actions are valued or the positive impact of their accomplishments. We also learned that vague feedback is correlated with lower performance review ratings for women — but not for men. In other words, vague feedback can specifically hold women back.***

Our research suggests these trends may result from unconscious bias. Stereotypes about women's capabilities mean that reviewers are less likely to connect women's contributions to business outcomes or to acknowledge their technical expertise. Stereotypes about women's care-giving abilities may cause reviewers to more frequently attribute women's accomplishments to teamwork rather than team leadership.

Our deeper analysis of over 200 performance reviews within one large technology company showed that reviews for women had vague praise more often than reviews for men (57% and 43%, respectively). Comments such as "You had a great year" populated many women's reviews. In contrast, our analysis found that developmental feedback for men was more likely to be linked to business outcomes (60% for men versus 40% for women).

Further, when women received specific developmental feedback, it tended to be overly focused on their communication style. While ability to communicate can be an important skill

for leaders, it is noteworthy that women received most of the negative feedback about communication styles. Comments such as “Her speaking style and approach can be off-putting to some people at times” point to a manager’s concern but do not offer ways to improve specific behaviors. This kind of feedback was frequently offered in women’s reviews. In fact, 76% of references to being “too aggressive” happened in women’s reviews, versus 24% in men’s.

In contrast, men were more likely to receive insightful developmental feedback about their technical skills, 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.” Developing relevant technical skills is essential to being considered a leader in a technical organization.

Clearly, these dynamics can disadvantage women at promotion time. Without specific, documented business accomplishments, it is difficult for a manager to make the case for advancement. Conversely, if a business objective was missed, a lack of frank feedback deprives women of the opportunity to hit the mark next time.

If reviewers do not specifically call out where women excel, where they need to build skills, and which technical projects they should target next, women are at a subtle disadvantage for promotion. This general lack of sponsorship may cause them to exit the field or move to a new company. Missed opportunities to develop critical skills may also lead to women being “tracked” into support functions, which are stereotypically female and do not lead to C-level roles or to board seats.

Necessary critical feedback can be difficult for a manager to offer to anybody, but as Professor Stacy Blake-Beard has shown, it can be especially uncomfortable when it is given across a dimension of difference, such as gender, race, or age. When giving critical feedback to women, male managers may be especially worried about how the feedback will be received. This “protective hesitation” — the failure to give feedback due to worry that the recipient might be upset — is a critical barrier in having conversations necessary to advance women’s careers.

The good news is that investing in better feedback can have dramatic results. In a pilot program called Step Up, implemented at Microsoft, technology leader Lauren Antonoff created a yearlong leadership development process grounded in clear and actionable feedback. Its purpose is to recognize what leaders are doing well and what they need to work on — with specific recommendations for improvement and with clear outcomes. Out of the 17 women who participated the first year, six were promoted into a leadership role.

Managers can improve the feedback they give and start leveling the playing field at the team level with a few simple steps:

- Before you begin evaluations, either written or verbal, outline the specific criteria you are employing to evaluate individuals. Articulate the specific results or behaviors that would demonstrate mastery. Use the same criteria for all employees at this level.
- Set a goal to discuss three specific business outcomes with all employees. If you can't think of those outcomes for a particular employee, dig deeper or ask the employee or their peers to provide more details.
- Systematically tie feedback — either positive or developmental — to business and goals outcomes. If you find yourself giving feedback without tying it to outcomes (e.g., “People like working with you”), ask yourself whether you can further tie the feedback to specific results (e.g., “You are effective at building team outcomes. You successfully resolved the divide between the engineering team and the product team on which features to prioritize in our last sprint, leading us to ship the product on time.”).
- When evaluating people in similar roles, equalize references to technical accomplishments and capability. Notice when detail is lacking for a particular employee and make an extra effort to determine whether something, either a skill or a developmental need, has been missed.
- Strive to write reviews of similar lengths for all employees. This helps ensure a similar level of detail — and therefore of specifics — for everyone.

These small wins, or what we call micro-sponsorship actions, offer pathways to equal access to leadership.

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