

# Removing Bias from Talent Development and Performance Management

## The Level Project



Accelerate Equality. Accelerate Success.

## What's included?

This document focuses on removing bias from talent development opportunities. It can be used alongside the documents referenced above, or as a standalone piece of work, with a focus on executive education opportunities.

## Introduction

Often the path of progression in an organisation is not explicit or clear. As discussed in the resource [“Identifying the Path to Leadership – The Role of Talent Management”](#), your first task should be to identify what experiences senior executives are expected to have completed. However, development should not be focused on experience alone, you should also consider the formal and executive opportunities offered to employees and check that you have removed bias and provided equal access to these opportunities.

In development, there is a common model used to understand the elements that contribute to learning. This model is referred to as the 70, 20, 10 Model. It states that 70% of what we learn we learn through experience, 20% we learn through others, and 10% we learn through formal education. In [“Identifying the Path to Leadership – The Role of Talent Management”](#), we discuss the importance of understanding the types of experience that build future executives and ensuring that women and men in your organisation has equal access to these types of opportunities. This is the 70%. In [“Establishing a Mentoring Programme”](#), we discuss how to establish mentoring programmes for progression. This is the 20%.

Here we will focus on the 10% of the 70, 20, 10 Model. These are the types of opportunities where there can be more formal education and how to ensure that you are removing bias in executive education opportunities.

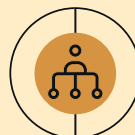
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## Start with this

- 1. How do you currently support executive education?** In any analysis of bias it is important to start from where you are. You might start by looking at the type of educational qualifications you have supported in the past. This will vary based on your sector. It may include, for example, accountancy qualifications, or advanced qualifications for engineers, or continuous professional development that employees undertake while working in your organisation.
- 2. Analyse the gender balance overall in the types of education you have supported in the past.** Are there more men than women taking advantage of this external support? If so, analyse why that might be. Is it because you provide educational support for those in one department, to pursue relevant professional qualifications and that department is predominantly male?
- 3. Identify actions to redress this imbalance.** This is not about increasing your expenditure on executive education but rather about working towards a more gender-balanced approach to how you allocate your budget. Might you, for example, support more women in your organisation to go for technical qualifications? If women are over-represented in the accounting department, are you supporting their professional development? This is especially important where promotion is dependent on completing technical or executive education.



## BE CAREFUL OF MANAGER DISCRETION

Why do you need to put frameworks in place to reduce manager discretion? Surely the point of having a manager is that you trust them to make impartial and fair decisions? The reality is that we are all subject to unconscious bias – this is covered elsewhere in this toolkit – and in this case we need to think about affinity bias. This bias leads us to prefer to hire, develop and promote people most like us; people that remind us of ourselves in terms of their gender, their experience, their school, their background and a range of other factors. By finding ways to support managers to be truly impartial we are supporting them to make fair, unbiased decisions.

- 4. Be clear and consistent in what you support.** Often, support for executive education or advanced degrees is based on the discretion of managers. This can be open to unconscious bias and lead to a gender imbalance in access to this type of support. Provide a clear framework for managers in making these types of decisions and identify how you will capture objective evidence to ensure that this support is being provided in a balanced way.

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5. **Minimise ad-hoc support.** Typically ad-hoc support, or support for education on a case-by-case basis, is most vulnerable to unconscious bias. While it might have been the way you have provided support in the past, think about formalising the process to ensure that it is fairly applied.

## What else?

In fact, applying a gender lens to all of the forms of development that you provide to your employees will help you start asking questions about where you might need to make adjustments. We discuss how to analyse the hiring process, step by step, in [“Eliminating Bias in the Hiring Process”](#) but apply the same principles to development.

### Ask:

1. **What is the split of men and women in executive education requests and funding?** If you support more men to complete MBAs, why might that be? If it is because women are not applying, why is that and what can you do to change this profile?
2. **What is the split of men and women on management development programmes?** If more men than women are being nominated to attend formal education by their managers, why is that? Consider implementing a requirement for balanced nominations for the programme. Find out why women are not being nominated. If managers believe they are not ready for the next level, ask them to provide specific examples of why this is and to put in place specific development to bridge that gap.



## DON'T STOP AT THE DATA

Data provides a great place to start and to monitor progress when identifying bias or verifying that initiatives are working. However, data alone will never provide the full picture — understanding the underlying drivers of the data is what will help you to really address the barriers to progression and/or development facing women in your organisation. Where data identifies a challenge:

- Ask managers why this might be the case
- Test their assumptions with a cross section of employees
- Arrive at a course of action
- Implement the change
- Use data to check if the picture is changing

3. **What is the split of men and women in mentoring programmes?** If more men than women are volunteering, ask why this is the case? The resource [“Using Focus Groups to Assess Employee Perceptions”](#) will provide you with a framework to conduct an additional enquiry.

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4. **What is the split of men and women in internal education opportunities?** Are more men than women attending internal training programmes? Why might this be the case? For example, is it that managers are not releasing women to attend these programmes? Or are women not aware of them? Or do they not understand how they might contribute to the overall portfolio of their eligibility for promotion?

## Managing performance

How do you manage performance for your employees? This is another area where as organisations develop and grow, the initial approach taken no longer serves the objectives of the founders of the organisation. As leadership, you would like to think that all of your employees are treated fairly, but as an organisation grows and your direct interaction with employees becomes limited, how do you ensure that the culture you intend is what your employees are experiencing from their managers? Building a formal approach to managing performance and giving employees feedback, is one of the ways that leadership can ensure that employees are developing.

Unfortunately, this can also be one of the areas in which women experience bias. Being aware of these biases can help to mitigate the process you have in place, or to build a process that will reduce the impact of bias. Here are some things to be aware of in analysing the performance management process:



### BE ON THE LOOKOUT FOR THE “UNWRITTEN RULES”

Conscious and unconscious bias is often present where the “unwritten rules” hold sway. When investigating what the data is telling you, listen for employees talking about “how things work in practice” and “how we do things around here”. Often bias is the result of accidental, inaccurate interpretation of a policy, or because a policy has not been designed to eliminate bias, or because leadership has not explicitly stated how they want something to be implemented.

1. Men tend to be judged on potential, women on performance.

**“The way this plays out in performance evaluations is that “prove-it-again” groups tend to be judged on their performance — their mistakes are noticed more and remembered longer — while the majority of white men are judged on their potential.”<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> hbr.org: how one company worked to root out bias from performance reviews

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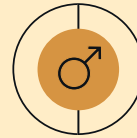
2. If you include a self-assessment, where employees write their own summary of performance before managers contribute, women are more likely to underrate themselves and men are more likely to overrate themselves.
3. Women are more likely to correct and adjust to feedback than men<sup>2</sup>
4. Men are more likely to get specific, actionable feedback than women and this vague feedback has been shown to lead to lower performance rankings<sup>3</sup>
5. Women are more likely to get critical subjective feedback than men<sup>4</sup>

## What to do<sup>5</sup>

Becoming conscious of the barriers to impartial performance management, as articulated above, will help you in designing and reviewing your performance management system. You may also consider designing in the following:

1. **Be specific about the things that should be measured for each role**, for example, by using a competency framework.

**“A competency framework is a structure that sets out and defines each individual competency (such as problem-solving or people management) required by individuals working in an organisation, or part of that organisation”<sup>6</sup>**



## GENDER BIAS IN REVIEWS ALSO HURTS MEN

In a pivotal piece of research into bias in performance management, a Stanford study highlighted that gender bias also hurts men. The tendency to underrate skills in collaboration, which women tend to exhibit in abundance, are not rated well for women or for men. In addition, “men who fail to take the initiative or exude confidence are often perceived as being ‘too soft.’” A perception that leadership is demonstrated only in the form of extroverted, decisive, hard, leadership behaviours does not serve women, men or employees who want a different leadership style from the “command and control” method of the past.

2. **Be specific!** Ask managers to provide three specific examples to back up their feedback of an employee’s performance or a type of behaviour. This will help managers to make judgements based on fact and specific examples.

<sup>2</sup> hbr.org: video

<sup>3</sup> hbr.org: vague feedback is holding women back

<sup>4</sup> hbr.org: how gender bias corrupts performance reviews and what to do about it

<sup>5</sup> hbr.org: how one company worked to root out bias from performance reviews

<sup>6</sup> www.cipd.ie: practical guidance factsheets competency



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3. **Provide training** for managers on how to use your performance management process and how to identify and overcome the impact of bias, as it relates to performance management, highlighting the types of bias that are most prevalent in this activity. These are detailed with prevention strategies in this resource from **Culture Amp**.<sup>7</sup>
4. **Monitor progress.** Described in the Harvard Business Review article “**How One Company Worked to Root Out Bias from Performance Reviews**”<sup>8</sup>, reviewing a sample of reviews and identifying trends in how women and men are assessed will help to review your existing process and/or monitor progress. This article from a Stanford study will also help you to identify where gender biased language may be playing a part in assessment.<sup>9</sup>
5. **Use your data.**
  - a. What is the gender split on completed reviews – do men and women have the same likelihood of having completed reviews?
  - b. What is the gender split on the assignment of performance ratings – if you have a five point scale, 1 being poor and 5 being excellent, what percentage of the higher scores were awarded to men versus women?
6. **Hold managers accountable** for producing balanced reviews. We are more likely to follow through on a behaviour if we now that we will be held accountable for that behaviour. This can be conducted in the form of a calibration meeting where a group of managers collectively discuss how they awarded their ratings. Empowering the group to challenge each other where specific examples are not provided by a manager, will help to hold managers accountable to providing evidence for their rating. This type of interaction will also help to reduce bias as we find it easier to identify bias in others than in ourselves – again, empower managers by setting the expectation that they will respectfully challenge each other’s assessments. This article, “Every manager should have this one meeting before completing their employees’ performance review”, provides a good overview of how a calibration meeting may help to set consistency and provide accountability.
7. **Ask your employees how you’re doing.** You have analysed your process and implemented changes and redesign, but is this what your employees are experiencing? Ask them – use surveys, focus groups, listening sessions to hear from employees about their experience. Pay attention to any variance in feedback from women and men in the organisation. Feed this back into your manager population to drive continuous improvement.

<sup>7</sup> [www.cultureamp.com](http://www.cultureamp.com): performance review bias

<sup>8</sup> [hbr.org](http://hbr.org): how one company worked to root out bias from performance reviews

<sup>9</sup> [www.gsb.stanford.edu](http://www.gsb.stanford.edu): inside black box organizational life gendered language performance