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LEADERSHIP PERFORMANCE REVIEWS

The abrasiveness trap: High-achieving men and women are described differently in reviews

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Does gender play a role in the type of feedback an employee receives at review time? We had a linguist crunch the numbers.

Not long ago I was talking to an engineering manager who was preparing performance reviews for his team. He had two people he wanted to promote that year, but he was worried that his peers were only going to endorse one of them. “Jessica is really talented,” he said. “But I wish she’d be less abrasive. She comes on too strong.” Her male counterpart? “Steve is an easy case,” he went on. “Smart and great to work with. He needs to learn to be a little more patient, but who doesn’t?”

I don’t know whether Jessica got her promotion, but the exchange got me wondering how often this perception of female abrasiveness undermines women’s careers in technology.

I focused on performance reviews for a couple of reasons. First, reviews provide written documentation of people’s perceptions. My friend called Jessica “abrasive,” but would he put that into her lasting professional record? Second, if I could collect a lot of reviews, I could get a statistical view of the situation.

I asked men and women in tech if they would be willing to share their reviews for a study and didn’t stipulate anything else. I figured only strong performers would be willing to share and was most interested in looking at the critical feedback that these strong performers had received. The reviews I collected were almost all positive.

The question I wanted to answer was: Did review tone or content differed based on the employee’s gender? I also wanted to know whether the manager’s gender was a factor in how they reviewed their employees. I was especially interested in employees who shared reviews given by both male and female managers.

In all, I collected 248 reviews from 180 people, 105 men and 75 women. The reviews come from 28 different companies and include large technology corporations, mid-size companies, and smaller environments. I didn’t see any impact of company size in the results, nor did I discover patterns unique to any individual company.

Here’s what I found.





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