

JOURNAL REPORTS: LEADERSHIP

The Reasons Women Don't Get the Feedback They Need

Research shows that getting ahead requires constructive criticism—and that many women don't get those frank assessments



Men get more, and more valuable feedback, than women do, studies show. PHOTO: MARTIN TOGNOLA

By Francesca Fontana

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Is there any such thing as an honest performance review anymore?

Giving sincere assessments about where people shine—and where they need to smooth out their rough edges—has always been tricky for managers. But in the current era of #MeToo and microaggressions, a lot of bosses are having a particularly hard time giving valuable feedback to women, according to several professors who study management issues.

Shelley Correll, a professor of sociology and organizational behavior at Stanford University, runs the Stanford VMware Women's Leadership Innovation Lab, which generates research surrounding the gender divide in the workplace and designs research-based solutions to help build better workplaces. Prof. Correll's research shows that leaders often give male employees specific (and sometimes harsh) feedback that helps them achieve specific goals, while women more commonly receive vague, personality-based feedback.

In an analysis of more than 200 performance reviews inside a large tech company—part of a broader study of performance evaluations of men and women across three high-tech companies and a professional-services firm—Prof. Correll and her researchers found that 60% of developmental feedback linked to business outcomes was given to men; only 40% was given to women.

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Women also tended to receive more fuzzy feedback tied to their communication styles. For example, a manager might simply say, “People find you off-putting,” without any details or suggestions, says Prof. Correll, who adds, “What can you do about that aside from worry?”

Even when women get the same advice from a manager as men, following that advice can prove detrimental to a woman’s career, says Elisabeth

Kelan, a professor of leadership and organization at Essex Business School in the U.K. Prof. Kelan’s research focuses in part on women in leadership.

“A man might be told to be ruthless to close a deal, but if a woman pursued the same strategy, she might be perceived as aggressive and receive negative feedback again,” she says.

Giving candid feedback to anybody can be tough for managers who want to avoid conflict or don’t have the time, Prof. Kelan says, but the lack of constructive feedback to females frequently stems from concern about appearing biased or being too harsh.

“There’s this fear that if you give a woman honest feedback she will break out in tears, that women need to be protected,” she says. “That’s just not the case.”

In her career, Clara Shih, chief executive and founder of software company Hearsay Systems Inc. and a Starbucks Corp. board director, says she has been dinged for being assertive or self-promotional—“things that you would not ding a man for.”

When Ms. Shih has to give feedback to her own employees, she applies this method: “Write it down, and then ask yourself, would you email this to a white man and have it on the record?”

People who don’t feel they are getting the honest assessments they need to grow should talk to their manager about how they work together and candidly ask how they are doing, she says, adding that they shouldn’t wait until performance-review time.

“As a manager, I feel more comfortable giving feedback to someone who gives me feedback,” Ms. Shih says. “It builds trust, making the working relationship more equitable.”

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WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE

This article is part of a Wall Street Journal special report on women, men and work based on a study by LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Co.

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