7 Ways to Check Your Bias When Evaluating Your Team

Now more than ever, you need to consider these factors while evaluating employees.

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“It starts with an I, and ends with an E,” my manager once said to me. “Initiative. I need you to show more initiative.”

One of my first jobs out of college was being an assistant. Although I was a hard worker, a go-getter and someone who (I thought) already took initiative, I tried hard to course-correct once I received that feedback. I did everything I could to take even more initiative.

I got in early, and I stayed late. I was there before my manager arrived and stayed after he left. I always checked in on what he needed. I anticipated when he would need print outs for meetings, got him coffee when I anticipated he needed it and protected time on his calendar. I was always on the lookout for opportunities to step up and make his life, and the team’s life, easier.

Yet, no matter what I did, my manager was convinced I didn’t show initiative. It was a story he had already told himself about my performance. He ignored the times I did show initiative. He looked for the times I didn’t show initiative to back his story about my performance. And his mind was made up — I was not someone who displayed the level of initiative he expected. There was nothing I could do to change his mind about his perception of myself and my performance.

As leaders, we need to constantly watch for and check our unconscious bias as we work to evaluate our team members inclusively. Here are seven ways to check your bias when evaluating your teams to ensure they get the most balanced view of their performance that you can provide:

1. Find quiet space and time to assess team members performance

Our biases will kick in when we are multi-tasking or in stressful situations. Make the dedicated time and space to assess team members. Block off your calendar, exit out of your email and turn off your cell phone. As leaders, we often forget all the things our team members have accomplished. Take the time to go through goals that have been set, emails and notes you have. Be fact-based when reviewing their experiences, projects and initiatives they took on when reviewing their performance.

2. Check and re-check biases that might have formed

You are convinced that your team member is a superstar and should be promoted immediately. Or they never come with solutions to problems and expect you to fix everything. They never meet deadlines on time. Or they always exceed expectations and go above and beyond consistently. Question and re-question the story you are telling yourself about their performance. Can anyone be amazing all the time? Can anyone be awful all the time? Be balanced and fair. Catch yourself when you use vague words to describe their work. Look at all the facts over the course of time you have worked together.

3. Ask your team for their self-assessments

It’s important that you ask your team members to do a self-assessment on their own performance to date. This is an important piece of evaluating talent inclusively. You might find that you have the same view of performance, or that you have vastly different views. Ensure that you also ask for your team members to provide evidence-based examples tied to results they have driven. It’s critical to have this input as you also enter leadership team meetings to evaluate overall talent.

4. Check in with colleagues to ask how your team members are performing

It’s important to ask other colleagues how your team is performing. If your organization provides an opportunity for your team to get 360 feedback, this might be a good time to utilize it. Otherwise, you can come up with standard questions you can ask all individuals, either over email or over video. Ensure you document the facts regarding their performance. Remember to balance out any incredibly negative feedback you might receive about your team member and focus on evidence-based examples.

5. Call out bias with confidence and respect when discussing talent with other leaders

“That’s a really biased statement, and I am not sure why you just said,” is not a helpful reaction. It breaks down any psychological safety to continue to have honest and courageous

conversations as a leadership team when evaluating talent. When you hear language like “He’s socially awkward” and “She doesn’t seem as dedicated since she became a mother,” be sure to call out this bias with confidence and respect. Use language like “Help me understand that” or “Tell me more about what you mean.” Coach with open-ended questions, ask for specific examples and help other leaders unpack and see the bias they might have when evaluating team members.

6. Be open and receptive when other leaders call out your bias

Even if we’ve done the work, we might still have biases we don’t realize as we enter this discussion. It’s human nature for many of us to be defensive when someone points out a flaw or a mistake we have made. When you say that someone on your team is consistently late for deadlines, and others question or counter your examples, take a deep breath and pause. Listen to the evidence other leaders are providing you. Here’s one way to respond: “Thank you for challenging me and bringing those examples to my attention. I hadn’t considered those points before and appreciate you broadening my perspective.”

7. Provide timely feedback rooted in facts and performance to team members

Following any talent calibration sessions, take the time to digest the discussions that occurred and decisions that were made. Is this team member ready for a promotion? Do they need to take an analytics course to strengthen their quantitative skills? Is there one are of opportunity that was identified, i.e. a next rotation into sales?

Not receiving timely, quality and actionable feedback can over

time can have devastating impact on one’s career. Be the best coach you can be to help your team members continue to focus on their strengths and tackle their areas of opportunity.

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