

TIPS FOR REDUCING UNCONSCIOUS BIAS IN EMPLOYEE TASK ASSIGNMENT

Task assignment is a key area where bias emerges, exacerbating workplace inequity. Research shows that women and members of other underrepresented groups are more often channeled into “execution” or project management roles and are less likely to receive high-value, high-visibility, or stretch assignments (Hewlett et al., 2008; 2014). As a result, underrepresented employees can have fewer opportunities to creatively contribute, learn, innovate, and shine. These patterns can also lead to low job satisfaction and higher turnover rates for these employees. The following tips will help supervisors root out bias and reduce this key barrier to fostering diverse, inclusive, and thriving teams.



CONDUCT A “TASK ASSIGNMENT” ASSESSMENT. BELOW ARE SOME KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK.

See the [Task Assignment Assessment](#) resource for more detail.

- Are some team members assigned more frequently to highly visible tasks or projects? This can happen inadvertently, especially when some team members are more vocal in requesting such assignments.
- Are other talented team members missing out on these assignments, perhaps because they are quieter or because their potential has been overlooked?
- Are some team members assigned more often to high-risk projects? Why or why not?
- Examine criteria used for task assignment. Make your criteria for assigning tasks on each project explicit and ensure they are relevant to those projects. For example, supervisors sometimes avoid assigning important projects to team members who work flexible hours, even though this schedule does not impair their ability to do the job. Look for these kinds of unconscious assumptions in the criteria you use for task assignment.

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WATCH FOR PATTERNS WHERE TEAM MEMBERS PERFORM STEREOTYPICALLY GENDERED ROLES.

Research illustrates that women more frequently take notes or take on “office housework” (e.g., organizing logistics, social events, etc.). In some cases, these individuals may volunteer to perform these roles, but they also may assume these roles because they are “just used to it,” or think that “no one else will do it,” or because other team members unconsciously (or consciously) assume they will take on these roles. Therefore, it is a good idea to make sure these roles are rotated throughout the team.



AVOID OR INTERRUPT COMMENTS SUCH AS THESE: “WOMEN ARE MORE SOCIAL” OR “MEN ARE BETTER PROBLEM-SOLVERS.”

These comments reflect a misunderstanding of gender-difference research and exaggerate its findings. While some differences exist, research also shows more “within-gender” variation than it does “cross-gender” variation. In other words, contrary to conventional wisdom, there are more differences among women or among men than there are between women and men. Likewise, this research does not demonstrate that these are “natural” or biological differences. Gently remind employees of these facts when they make these sorts of comments.



AVOID THE “GLASS CLIFF” PHENOMENON.

Underrepresented employees may sometimes be given the riskier or more precarious projects. Ensure that all employees have the support, resources, and authority necessary before they are promoted or assume project leadership. Also, resist the pressure to fill quotas by promoting “token” employees from underrepresented groups before they are ready. When tracking task assignment patterns, assess and note the risk level of each task or project for different employees and consider risk when evaluating performance and project outcomes.



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TASK ASSIGNMENT ASSESSMENT

Use the chart on the next page to assess patterns in your assignment of tasks and projects. Record the recent and current projects each employee is assigned, and consider whether these projects might be high risk for those individuals and/or highly visible. Consider the following kinds of questions when examining the results.

- Describe your typical process for task assignment. Is it decided “on the spot” in meetings? Does it allow opportunities for reflection and consideration of previous assignments? Does the process itself disproportionately benefit loud, outspoken, confident/ambitious employees?
- Are some team members assigned more frequently to highly visible tasks or projects? Are other talented team members missing out on these assignments, perhaps because they are quieter, do not clamor for these assignments, or because of other “personality” or “work style” biases that actually may not inhibit their ability to do the job?
- Do some team members always get certain tasks because they’ve always been the ones to do them?
- Do all team members equally share/rotate the burden of “office housework” tasks (e.g., organizing logistics, social events, note taking, etc.)?
- Might there be others who could use the opportunity to further develop themselves?
- Are some team members assigned more often to high-risk or “scapegoat” tasks or projects?
- Do some team members get to play creative/innovative roles more often than others?
- Are some team members assigned to execution roles more often than others?
- What other patterns do you see in assignments? Are there problems with these patterns?

