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# Why Managers are Kinder to Women in Workplace Reviews



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## **Employers are nicer to women because of the stereotype that women are “warmer”. Here’s why that’s a problem.**

Women are more likely than men to receive positive feedback from their managers. But an overly enthusiastic performance review is not necessarily a good thing.

**Prior research** shows female employees are often told white lies while their male equivalents are dealt the harsh, honest truth. This is problematic because inaccurate, inflated feedback can hurt a woman’s ability to receive important job assignments, raises or promotions.

But why are women reviewed differently? Do managers think female employees can’t handle the truth? Is hostile or benevolent sexism at play?

We set out to investigate what drives gender bias in workplace reviews and found that managers aim to be kinder to women because of the gender stereotype that women are warmer and “nicer” than men.

In a recent paper published in *[Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin](#)* and summarised in *[Harvard Business Review](#)*, we theorise that people make kindness a higher priority when giving feedback to a woman versus a man, due to the association of women with warmth. This can in turn motivate them to exhibit greater positivity.

### **Kindness and candour can go hand in hand**

We tested our argument that warmth drives gendered positivity biases in two ways: directly by assessing perceptions of warmth and indirectly by testing whether people see kindness as more helpful for women.

We first checked for real-world evidence of this in the evaluations of high-performing MBA students. A sample of 423 students nominated supervisors, mentors, peers, and subordinates to offer feedback on their performance.

We asked evaluators to consider how kind and candid their responses were and checked if they were aware of how positive their feedback was.

Evaluators indicated that they prioritised kindness more in feedback to women, but there was no significant difference in the priority placed on candour.

While evaluators did not self-report giving more positive feedback to women than men, analysis of their qualitative answers revealed that their comments to women had a more positive tone, included a higher percentage of words associated with positive emotions and included a lower percentage of words associated with negative emotions.

We then took an experimental approach and conducted multiple studies to test whether MBA students, experiment participants and managers would prioritise kindness more when anticipating giving developmental feedback to a woman versus a man.

Participants were asked what their top priorities were in a hypothetical scenario where they had to give feedback to an underperforming employee whose name implied their gender (they were either called “Andrew” or “Sarah”). As predicted, participants prioritised kindness significantly more for Sarah than for Andrew. Further, we found that both male and female evaluators exhibited this differential tendency to an equal degree. Put simply, whether the participant was a man or a woman had no influence on how they rated Sarah or Andrew.

## **Is sexism at play?**

Interestingly, participants prioritised candour when it came to giving feedback to both Sarah and Andrew about their performance. This indicates that hostile sexism, in that evaluators have hostile intentions and don't want women to succeed, is not driving this effect.

Alongside hostile sexism, we tested other possible mechanisms. These included stereotypes that women are less competent, benevolent sexist instincts that women need protection, lower standards of judgement among women compared to men, concerns about appearing prejudiced, and stereotypes about men being more disagreeable.

To investigate these alternative drivers, participants rated how much they saw the employee as competent, how strongly they believed women should be cherished and protected by men, how surprised they were by the poor performance and how comfortable they felt about giving the feedback. In addition, they were asked how the feedback might be received, how concerned they were that the employee would disagree and how they thought the employee would feel after the feedback.

None of these gender condition differences emerged from the results. Participants were simply motivated to be kinder to women because of the stereotype that women are warmer.

Nevertheless, future research should address questions about how intersections of race and gender shape feedback, and also explore intersectional and gender-nonbinary dynamics. For example, evaluators may prioritise kindness and at the same time not want to appear racist, transphobic or simply a bigot, which could exacerbate biases.

## **Who “wins” at the end of the day?**

In our final study, we measured warmth indirectly by asking real-world managers how helpful they see kind feedback as being. Consistent with the earlier studies, we found that people rated kind feedback as more helpful for Sarah than Andrew, and candour as equally helpful for them both.

These findings raise important questions about who loses – and how – when managers prioritise kindness towards women, especially if honesty is equally prioritised. If greater kindness and positivity towards women shrouds the candour of the feedback, it may inhibit women's ability to learn and predict

their future outcomes.

However, harsher feedback to men may foster cultures that reduce men's dedication and well-being at work. This could potentially contribute to fostering cultures of toxic masculinity that are constrain all genders.

Our results indicate that managers need to reflect on what they prioritise when giving feedback and how this is shaped by the recipient's gender.

At the end of the day, kind feedback is not the issue. All employees could benefit from a little positivity and enthusiasm. The problem arises when managers assume kindness is necessary based on an employee's gender alone. Managers may need to work on providing positive feedback across the board, or to keep kindness in check when reviewing female employees. There's benefit in going in both directions or finding a happy medium.

Leaders need to find ways to operationalise kindness in workplace reviews and turn the power of positivity into something that's helpful for all. Only then can we begin to achieve the broader social goal of gender equity in the workplace.

#### **Find article at**

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/career/why-managers-are-kinder-women-workplace-reviews>

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#### **About the research**

**"A Bias Toward Kindness Goals in Performance Feedback to Women (vs. Men)"** is published in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.