

Another Roadblock for Women: Performance Reviews¹

Men tend to get more helpful feedback during performance reviews than women

do, experts say. By. [Debra A. Nunes and Jane Stevenson, Korn Ferry](#)

“You’ll get farther by being more assertive.”

“You had a good year.”

“People like working with you.”

Most everyone has seen those or other imprecise comments on [performance reviews](#), but a new study finds that they’re especially prevalent in reviews of women. Indeed, experts say that this type of vague feedback, not tied to any concrete measure of performance, is actually keeping women from advancing to higher levels of leadership.

Men get a clearer picture of what they are doing well and more-specific guidance of where to improve to get to the next level, says Shelley Correll, a Stanford University sociology professor who has studied performance evaluations.

According to a review of more than 200 performance reviews from four companies done by Correll and Stanford colleague Caroline Simard, 57% of women got vague-sounding praise on their reviews, compared with 43% of men. And 60% of men had their feedback tied to business outcomes, while only 40% of women did.

The results are in line from interviews and research done by Korn Ferry. Men are offered a clearer picture of what they are doing well and more specific guidance of what is needed to get to the next level. About 45% of all S&P 500 employees are women, but women hold only 37% of

¹ Source: https://www.cfo.com/workplace-issues/2019/11/another-roadblock-for-women-performance-reviews/?utm_campaign=CFOWeekly&utm_source=CFO-email&utm_medium=email&utm_content=CFOWeekly_Friday_2019-11-15&utm_term

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first or mid-level management positions and less than 6% of CEO spots, according to research group Catalyst.

Experts lay some of the blame for the differences on unconscious bias. Though they may never express it in words, there are still many people who believe that women aren't capable of handling higher-level leadership roles. Unconscious bias training can help people recognize these traits and help overcome them, and the practice is becoming more prevalent within organizations.

But roadblocks remain. According to recent studies, about 30% of companies don't have clear and specific criteria set before performance reviews begin. And, in light of the #MeToo era, some men fear giving candid feedback to a woman.

To be sure, as the Stanford researchers show, plenty of men get vague feedback, too.

Still, organizations and senior executives can make a bigger commitment to have feedback revolve around observable and measurable things. If all feedback is performance-based, even seemingly tough-to-define but valuable traits can be constructively highlighted.

For instance, instead of saying *"you're a good listener,"* an evaluator can say, *"Your ability to understand people's concerns helped your department adopt new procedures faster than other divisions."*

As for the benefits of succinct feedback, consider what female bosses told Korn Ferry in its 2018 study, [***"Women CEOs Speak."***](#) Every one of the 54 participating female chief executives said some of their success came from getting straight feedback, helping them identify the skills and experiences each needed to enhance their careers.

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[Korn Ferry](#), [MeToo](#), [performance reviews](#), [unconscious bias](#)