

Guide to Interrupting Bias in Performance Evaluations

Source: [Bias Interrupter Toolkits – Organizational Tools](#)

***Important Note:** This is a working document. People & Culture is adapting this material to be of highest relevance to JFF's culture and work; this effort is still in progress. The original version of this material focused more on gender bias and was more suited to a corporate setting.*

If you have feedback on this guide please be in touch directly with Jen.

As leaders, managers and individual contributors committed to diversity, equity and inclusion in all our work, we should seek to apply bias interrupters in both our written evaluations, as well as our meetings, whether these are 1:1 discussions about performance, feedback to a peer or other colleague, or our bi-annual leadership team calibration meeting.

Because every organization is different, not all interrupters are highlighted here or in the source above are highly relevant for JFF. People & Culture has selected the most relevant and representative for our organization and culture – and we hope that we can continue to add to our understanding of the many ways that bias plays into our evaluations of our talent.

Note: Researchers consulted hundreds of studies to inform these bias interruption resources – if you're interested in that detailed background, the web page includes a version of this content with citations.

- **Empower each one of us involved in the evaluation process to spot and interrupt bias.** Read this document. Check out the original source. Reflect on the language we choose and how we talk about performance. Get curious with each other about the data behind our evaluations in all our conversations.
- **Appoint Bias Interrupters and have them play an active role in calibration meetings.** We will seek to designate team members to spot bias and inquire about bias in our biannual calibration meetings and build this capacity more broadly in our organization so we can hold it in all of our evaluation conversations.
- **Begin with clear and specific performance criteria directly related to job requirements.** While we need to strengthen our competency model, and differentiate it more clearly by level, it remains a tool we should be using. For example: “They can create and actively manage complex work plans and timelines for projects and adapt the plan quickly when needed” instead of: “They manage projects well.”
- **Require evidence (data) that justifies the rating.** For example: “In March, they gave X presentation in front of Y partner on Z project, answered questions in the moment effectively, and received positive feedback from the partner,” instead of: “They're quick on their feet.”
- **Consider performance and potential separately for each person.** Performance and potential should be considered separately given the tendency for majority men to be judged on potential and others on performance.

- **Separate personality issues from skill sets for each person.** Personal style should be appraised separately from skills, because a narrower range of behavior often is accepted from women and people of color. For example, women may be labeled “difficult” for doing things that are accepted in majority men.
- **Don’t eliminate your performance appraisal system.** Eliminating formal performance evaluation systems and replacing them with feedback-on-the-fly creates conditions for bias to flourish.

Watch Outs: Four Patterns to Look for When Identifying & Interrupting Bias in Performance Evaluations

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The four patterns below describe tendencies not absolutes. Some are more, or less, relevant for JFF. Use these patterns to provoke your thinking about and reflect on the performance of members of your team and others at JFF.

Prove-It-Again (PIA)

Groups stereotyped as less competent often have to prove themselves over and over. PIA groups include women, people of color, individuals with disabilities, older employees, LGBT+, and class migrants (professionals from blue-collar backgrounds).

1. **“He’ll crush it”;** **“She’s not ready.”** PIA groups judged on performance; others on potential. Race and ethnicity can be at play here in addition to gender.
2. **“He’s skilled; she’s lucky.”** PIA groups’ successes attributed to luck, dominant groups’ successes attributed to skill.
3. **“It could happen to anyone”;** **“She blew it.”** PIA groups’ mistakes tend to be noticed more and remembered longer, whereas majority men’s mistakes, or dominant group members tend to be written off, or more easily forgiven
4. **PIA groups get horns; others a halo.** Horns=one weakness generalized into an overall negative rating. Halo=one strength generalized into a global positive rating. In addition, mistakes by one PIA group member may reinforce negative group stereotypes.
5. **“We applied the rule—until we didn’t.”** Objective requirements applied rigorously to PIA groups— but applied leniently or waived for dominant groups.
6. **Do only the superstars survive?** Superstars may escape PIA problems that affect others.

Tightrope (TR)

A narrower range of workplace behavior may be accepted from women and people of color (“TR groups”) compared with other dominant culture groups.

1. **Leader or worker bee?** TR groups face pressure to be “worker bees” who work hard and are undemanding...but if they comply, they lack “leadership potential.”
2. **Modest, helpful, nice; dutiful daughter, office mom?** Prescriptive stereotypes create pressures on women to be modest, mild-mannered team players—“ambitious” is not a compliment for women and niceness may be optional for men but required of women.
3. **Direct and assertive—or angry and abrasive?** Direct, competitive, and assertive in majority men may be seen as inappropriate in TR groups —“tactless,” “selfish,” “difficult” “abrasive.” Anger that’s accepted from majority men may be seen as inappropriate or even threatening in TR groups, and men and women of color – and especially black men or women of color – are subject to this.
4. **Office housework vs glamour work.** TR groups report less access to career-enhancing opportunities and more “office housework”—planning parties & cleaning up; taking notes & arranging meeting times; mentoring & being the peacemaker. This can also play into being perceived as having a “lack of leadership potential.”
5. **“She’s a prima donna”; “He knows his own worth.”** The kind of self-promotion that works for majority men may be seen as off-putting in TR groups. Modest men may encounter bias about how “real men” should behave. Strong modesty norms can make some groups uncomfortable with self-promotion.

The Parental Wall

The Parental Wall can affect both fathers and mothers—as well as employees without children.

1. **“She’s the breadwinner.”** Parents can face expectations that they will not—or should not—take time off for caregiving. They may be seen as deserving more pay or promotion because of their presumed family role.
2. **“Their priorities lie elsewhere.”** Mothers, and any parent, may be stereotyped as less competent, committed or reliable, and are less likely to be promoted as identical candidates without children.
3. **“It’s not a good time for her.”** Opportunities or promotions may be withheld on the assumption that parents will not—or should not—want them (e.g., proximate to parental leave).
4. **“They have time.”** Employees without children may face the assumption that they can always pick up the slack because they have “more time.”

Tug of War

Sometimes bias creates conflict within underrepresented groups.

1. **Tokenism.** If people feel there's only one slot per group for a prized position, group members may be pitted against each other to get it. This usually applies to members of a racial or ethnic group, or in some contexts, gender.
2. **Strategic distancing and the loyalty tax.** People from underrepresented groups may feel they need to distance themselves from others of their group, or align with the dominant culture against their own group, in order to get ahead.
3. **Passthroughs.** PIA: People from underrepresented groups may hold members of their own groups to higher standards because "That's what it takes to succeed here."
Tightrope: Women may fault each other for being too masculine—or too feminine.
People of color may fault each other for overly adhering to white dominant norms—or not adhering enough. Parental wall: Parents may fault each other for handling parenthood the wrong way—for taking too much time off or too little.

Seven Powerful Bias Interrupters: Our Commitments

1. Give evidence (from the evaluation period) to explain and back up our assessments.
2. Make sure to give everyone—or no one—the benefit of the doubt.
3. If we waive objective rules we will do so consistently.
4. We will not insist on likeability, modesty, or deference from some but not others.
5. We will challenge our assumptions about what any of our people want or are able to do.
6. If we comment on “culture fit,” “leadership presence,” or other vague concepts, start by sharing a clear definition and let’s help each other keep track to ensure we apply these concepts consistently.
7. We will provide honest feedback to all staff on the backend of this process to ensure they can continue their learning and grow.