Identifying and Interrupting Bias

The four patterns below describe tendencies, not absolutes. Here’s what to watch out for:

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).

- "He'll crush it"; "She's not ready." PIA groups judged on performance; others on potential.
- "He's skilled; she's lucky." PIA groups' successes attributed to luck, majority men's successes attributed to skill.
- "It could happen to anyone."; "She blew it." PIA groups' mistakes tend to be noticed more and remembered longer, whereas majority men's mistakes tend to be written off.
- PIA groups get horns; others a halo. "Horns" = one weakness generalized into an overall negative rating. "Halo" = one strength generalized into an overall positive rating. In addition, mistakes made by one PIA group member may reinforce negative stereotypes.
- "We applied the rule - until we didn't." Objective requirements applied rigorously to PIA groups - but applied leniently or waived for majority men.
- Do only the superstars survive? Superstars may escape PIA problems that affect others.

Tightrope

A narrower range of workplace behavior often is accepted from women and people of color ("TR groups"). Class migrants (professionals from blue-collar backgrounds) and modest or introverted men can face Tightrope problems, too.

- 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".
- Modest, helpful, nice; dutiful daughter, office mom? Prescriptive stereotypes create pressures on women to be modest, mild-mannered team players - so "ambitious" is not a compliment for women and niceness may be optional for men but required for women.
- 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.
- Office housework vs glamour work. TR groups report less access to career-enhancing opportunities and more "office housework" - planning parties and cleaning up; taking notes and arranging meeting times; mentoring and being the peacemaker.
- "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 class migrants, Asian-Americans, and women uncomfortable with self-promotion.
- Racial stereotypes. Asian-Americans are stereotyped as passive and lacking in social skills; African-Americans as angry or too aggressive; Latinos as hotheaded or emotional.

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