

Language Bias in **PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK**

2022 Data Analysis and Survey Results



Key findings

Textio has found strong patterns of inequity in job performance feedback. In our survey data, the groups of people who are most underrepresented in business report receiving lower quality feedback. These results are further confirmed by our data analysis of performance reviews written for over 25,000 people. Consistent patterns of inequity show up by gender, race and age, and effects can compound for people from multiple underrepresented groups.

GENDER BIAS

- Compared to men, women are 7x more likely to report being described as “**opinionated**,” and 11x more likely to report being described as “**abrasive**.”
- Men are 3x more likely to report being described as “**confident**,” and 3.7x more likely to report being described as “**ambitious**.”
- Women receive 22% more feedback about their **personality** than men do. Women also receive 30% more **exaggerated** feedback than men.
- Compared to younger white men, Women over 40 receive more than 4x the amount of feedback that’s **not actionable**.

AGE BIAS

- People under 40 report being described as “**ambitious**” 2.5x as often as people who are 40 and older.
- People over 40 are far more likely to be called “**responsible**” and “**unselfish**” than younger workers.

RACIAL BIAS

- Asian people get **more feedback** than people of any other race—25% more than white people—and Black men get the least feedback of all.
- Compared to their Asian and white counterparts, Black and Latinx people report being described as “**passionate**” (frequently a euphemism for “can’t get along with others”) 2.1x as often.
- Black and Latinx people receive 2.4x more feedback that’s **not actionable** compared to white and Asian people.

COMPOUNDING EFFECTS

- Black men receive 1/3 **less feedback** than white women on average, as measured by word count.
- Black women receive nearly 9x as much feedback that’s **not actionable** compared to white men under 40.
- White men under 40 get the word “**brilliant**” in performance feedback 8.7x more than women over 40.

Foreword

It's hard to imagine today, but ten years ago, few people were looking at language bias in the workplace. Today everyone is talking about DEI and inclusive language. A decade ago, it was barely on the map.

After finishing my PhD in 2003, I took a job in tech. In my first week at work, I attended a math talk at Microsoft Research. When I arrived, a guy redirected me to the design meeting next door. It didn't occur to him that I, a woman in my 20s, was there to talk math.

Over multiple decades, I've built software used by billions of people. By and large, I've loved it. But I've also had countless experiences like the one in that first week. Like that one, most were subtle. Others were more overt. Having my manager call attention to my breast size in a work meeting. Being told to wait for a promotion because I was eight months pregnant.

When I started researching workplace communication, I'd spent much of my career working with natural language corpora. I started collecting systematic data on professional communication and gender. I found patterns of bias in meetings, in resumes, on Twitter, and in performance feedback.

I published the first broadly available insights about gender bias in performance reviews in *Fortune* in August 2014. I was shocked at the avalanche that the article set off. Within 48 hours of publishing, I received 1,500 messages. I heard from leaders of all genders who were grateful, skeptical, and angry.

Most of all, I heard from women. They shared that reading the article made them feel seen and validated. "*I knew I wasn't crazy!*" is the most common thing they said.

It feels obvious in 2022. Since then, many researchers have published similar results. At the time, I had no idea that publishing bias research based on language data would launch a revolution.

Eight years later, this report shares some new data. Looking at both survey responses and people's actual performance feedback documents, we wanted to know whether different groups of people still receive substantially different feedback. The 2014 study focused on gender; for this update, we looked at gender, race, and age.

You might ask why this matters. So what if women are more likely to be called "abrasive" than men? Who cares if white people are called "geniuses" 2.5 times more often than Black people? It matters because people with access to actionable feedback grow faster, earn more, and have more opportunities for leadership.

We still have a lot of work to do. Let's dive in.



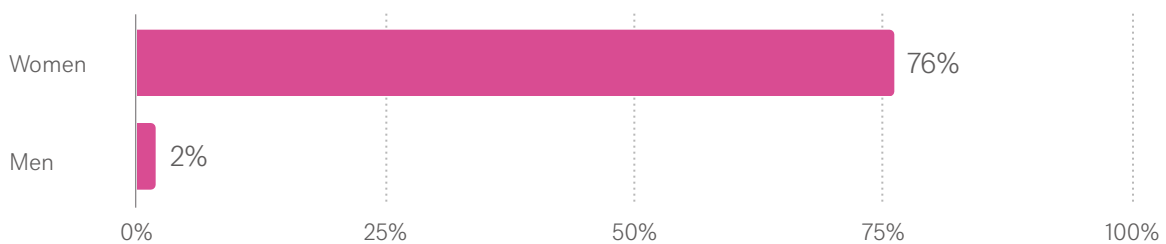
Kieran Snyder
CEO and Co-Founder, Textio

Bias in performance feedback

A decade's worth of data

In 2014, linguist and tech executive Kieran Snyder published a groundbreaking study analyzing language patterns in the performance reviews of hundreds of high-performing men and women working in the technology industry. While both men and women received critical feedback, the high-performing women were significantly more likely to receive critical feedback that was overtly negative rather than constructive.

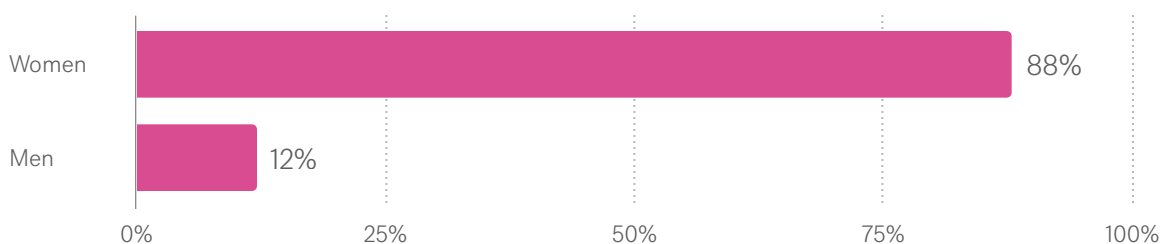
Negative feedback received by high-performing employees



Only 2% of the men received explicitly negative feedback compared to 76% of the women. This is particularly striking in light of the fact that all participants in the study were high performers.

Both men and women received feedback about the quality of their work. However, the women were also more likely to receive feedback about their personality. Language like **abrasive**, **difficult**, **friendly**, and **helpful** showed up in the majority of women's reviews, but in very few of the men's.

Personality feedback received by high-performing employees



Furthermore, manager gender was not significant in these findings; both men in management and women in management showed the same patterns of gender bias in their feedback language.

Numerous other studies have reported similar insights over the last several years. In 2021, Stanford professors Shelley J. Correll, Katherine R. Weisshaar, Alison T. Wynn, and JoAnne Delfino Wehner published a [comprehensive study of gender bias](#) in the performance reviews of Fortune 500 employees.

Correll (et al.) found that men and women received substantially different feedback. They report, “Men and women are equally likely to be described as having technical ability, while women are viewed as too aggressive and men as too soft. Furthermore, some behaviors, such as ‘taking charge,’ are more valued for men than for women: ‘taking charge’ is associated with the highest performance ratings for men but not for women.”

Several researchers have highlighted that Black women face even greater bias. According to the [Women in The Workplace](#) survey from Leanin.org and McKinsey & Co, 40% of Black women have had their judgment questioned within their area of expertise. This is in contrast to only 27% of men. 41% percent of the Black women surveyed also said that they’d never had a meaningful interaction with a senior leader about their work.

Across the board, this body of research has shown that women receive harsher feedback, more personality feedback, and less constructive or actionable feedback than their male counterparts. This has been true even when the women are top performers.

Experiencing feedback

What employees report

In assessing the landscape in 2022, we started by asking people directly what kind of feedback they can recall having received at work. In this survey, we were particularly interested in personality feedback: feedback that is not concerned with the quality of someone's work, but instead focuses on some aspect of their core personality.

Since the initial 2014 study, several other researchers have shared data showing that some groups are more likely to receive personality feedback than others. In the [Harvard Business Review report](#) on her groundbreaking research on language bias in performance reviews, Paola Cecchi-Demeglio notes that women are 1.4 times more likely than men to receive subjective critical feedback about areas of their personality.

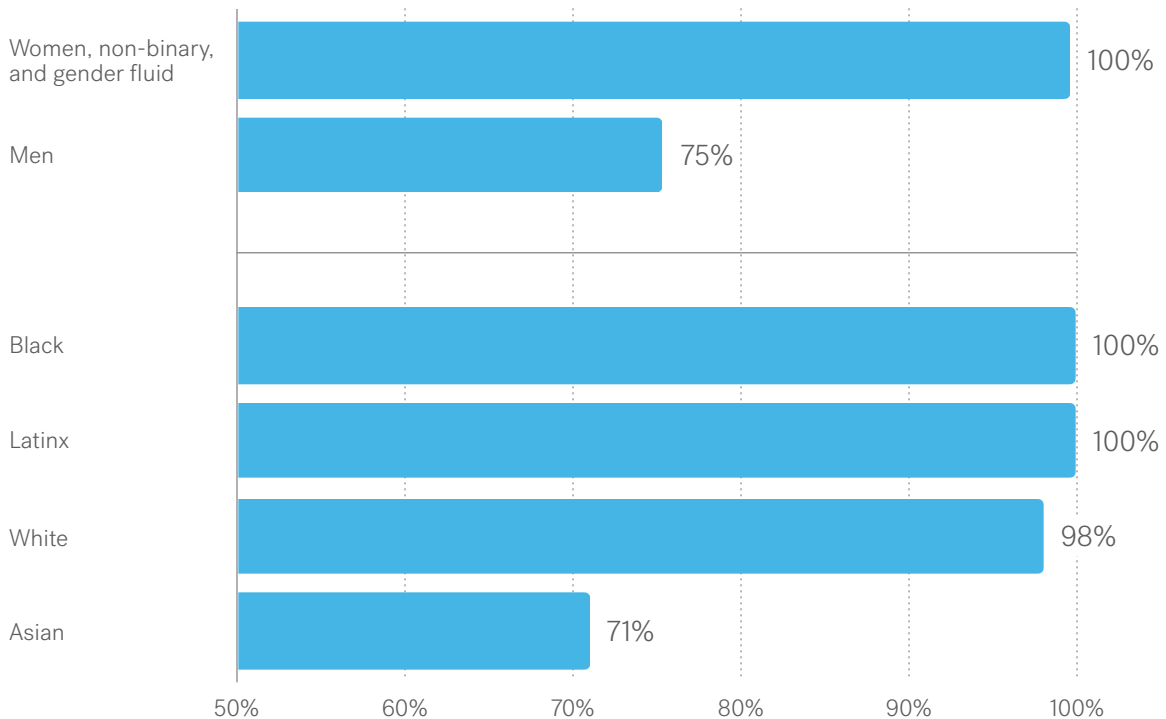
It may not be immediately obvious to some managers why personality feedback is problematic, especially when the feedback is positive. It's clear to most people why describing a coworker as [irritating](#) is inappropriate, but what's wrong with calling them [outgoing](#) or [nice](#)?

A [2015 study](#) by the Clayman Institute of Gender Studies at Stanford University shows that men hear nearly twice as many references as women to their technical expertise and their vision, and men are three times more likely to hear feedback related to a general business outcome. Even in cases where reviewers believe they are offering women positive feedback, the feedback is more focused on team achievements than the women's individual contributions.

To explore this further, we asked 500 people via internet survey to recall personality feedback that they have received at work. We were interested in discovering whether some groups recalled hearing more personality feedback than others. We also wanted to know whether different personality traits showed up more commonly in feedback given to different demographic groups.

Most survey participants reported that they have heard personality feedback at work from a manager or coworkers: 88% of participants in all. This high rate is even higher for Black people, Latinx people, and women of all races. Nearly 100% of participants from these groups recall receiving personality feedback at work. By contrast, only 71% of Asian people can recall receiving this kind of feedback at work.

People who report receiving personality feedback



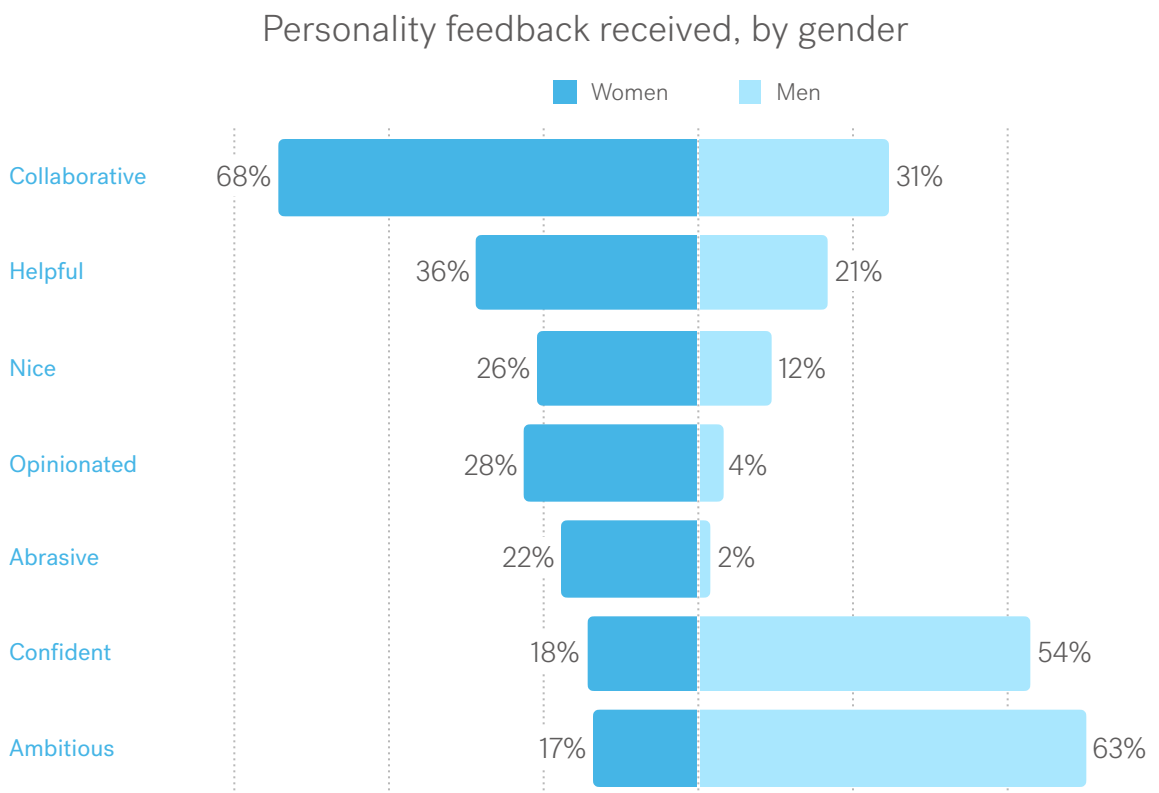
Survey question: "Have you ever gotten feedback about your personality from a manager or coworkers?"

Personality feedback is inherently less actionable than feedback about someone's work; it's much easier to change your work than it is to alter your core personality. As such, groups that get more personality feedback are at an inherent disadvantage when it comes to demonstrating growth and achieving career advancement. It's notable that the demographics who most consistently recall hearing feedback about their personalities are also the demographics most underrepresented in business and especially in leadership.

EXPERIENCING FEEDBACK

Bias by **gender** in personality feedback

We also wanted to understand whether different demographic groups received different kinds of personality feedback. Within the frame of personality feedback, were some groups more likely to be associated with positive or negative traits? To assess this, we offered participants a list of 20 different traits. We then asked them to select the traits that they had heard most often in their own professional feedback.



Survey question: “Which of these traits have you most often heard people use to describe you at work?”

Several traits showed up differently in the feedback reported by men and women. Compared to their male counterparts, women are twice as likely to report being described as **collaborative** and **nice**, seven times more likely to report being described as **opinionated**, and 11 times more likely to report being described as **abrasive**.

On the other hand, men are three times more likely to report being described as **confident**, and 3.7 times more likely to report being described as **ambitious**. Which traits do you think managers usually see as most indicative of their top performers: **abrasive** and **nice**, or **confident** and **ambitious**?

EXPERIENCING FEEDBACK

Bias by race and ethnicity in personality feedback

As with gender, several traits showed up differently in the feedback reported by people of different races and ethnicities.

These patterns are remarkably skewed. White people report being described as **ambitious** 4.9 times more often than Black people, and Asian people 7.1 times more. By contrast, Black and Latinx people report being described as **passionate**—in the corporate world, often a euphemism for **has a strong personality** and **can't get along with others**—a combined 2.1 times more often than Asian and white people.

Personality feedback language received, by race/ethnicity



Survey question: “Which of these traits have you most often heard people use to describe you at work?”

The word **professional** shows up statistically more often in feedback for people of color. White employees rarely receive this label. This pattern is troubling in light of the vast research that has been published on the cost of linguistic code-switching in the workplace. For instance, in a [2019 Harvard Business Review](#) study, McCluney (et al.) report that “[f]or black people and other racial minorities, downplaying membership in a stigmatized racial group helps increase perceptions of professionalism and the likelihood of being hired.” They also note that this code-switching behavior carries significant social and psychological repercussions.

In other words, receiving the label **professional** in performance feedback may carry a substantial psychological cost for non-white employees.

EXPERIENCING FEEDBACK

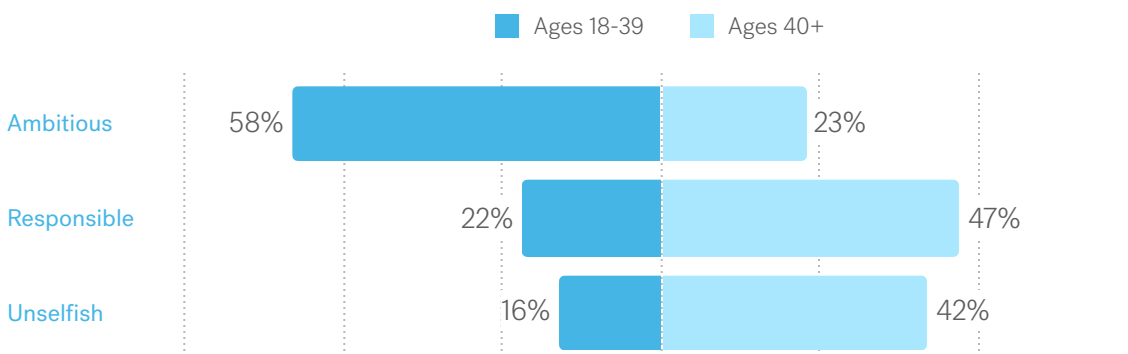
Bias by age in personality feedback

We also see bias by age. People under 40 and people over 40 commonly report hearing different traits in their personality feedback.

As with gender and race, **ambitious** shows up with high differentiation for age; people under 40 report being described as **ambitious** 2.5 times more often than their older coworkers.

By contrast, people over 40 are much more likely to be described as **responsible** and **unselfish**—2.1 times more often and 2.6 times more often, respectively.

Personality feedback language received, by age group



Survey question: “Which of these traits have you most often heard people use to describe you at work?”

It’s not hard to recognize how common stereotypes about age underlie these feedback patterns. Older workers are expected to be stable, mature, and self-effacing; younger workers with most of their careers in front of them are more likely to be seen as go-getters.

EXPERIENCING FEEDBACK

What can these **patterns** in self-reporting tell us?

We conducted this survey to understand how different groups of people have internalized the feedback they've received. Of course, a skeptic might point out that just because someone recalls receiving a piece of feedback doesn't mean that it was worded exactly the way they remember it. Similarly, just because someone doesn't recall hearing a piece of feedback doesn't mean that it wasn't communicated.

This is of course true. But arguably, these potential scenarios only serve to make the patterns in this survey data even more striking. Regardless of what feedback is actually being given, different groups of people are clearly *hearing* different things.

Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson coined the term *stereotype threat*, which refers to the risk that underrepresented people feel of confirming negative stereotypes about their respective racial, ethnic, gender, or cultural groups. This in turn can create high cognitive load and reduce academic or professional focus and performance. Researchers have found that stereotype threat impacts women's performance in math assessments, Black students' standardized test performance, and more.

So when one demographic is more likely than another to hear personality feedback, the impact on performance and future opportunity can be substantial. With that context, let's review the patterns within written performance feedback that was received by more than 25,000 professionals to see what is actually being said.

Written performance feedback

Who receives high-quality feedback?

Surveys tell part of the story; they show how people of different backgrounds have encoded the feedback that they regularly receive. Looking at documented, written performance feedback gives us another lens. Which groups of people receive high-quality feedback, and which do not? Is access to meaningful performance feedback equitable?

The analysis in this report considers documented performance feedback received by more than 25,000 people, along with their demographic data. Three data sets are included:

Large company data set	13,007 employees	1 large organization
Mid-sized company data set	2,857 employees	1 mid-sized organization
Community data set	10,012 employees	250+ different organizations
Total:	25,876 employees	

We looked at these data sets individually and in combination. We expected the community data set to reveal patterns of demographic bias that transcend the culture of any particular organization. We also wanted to discover whether the two data sets from distinct organizations showed any patterns unique to their cultures.

Some patterns were indeed organizationally specific. Sometimes an organization's unique environment shapes its feedback culture. For instance, the average volume of written feedback per employee varies widely by organization; some cultures place a high value on the written word, whereas others do not.

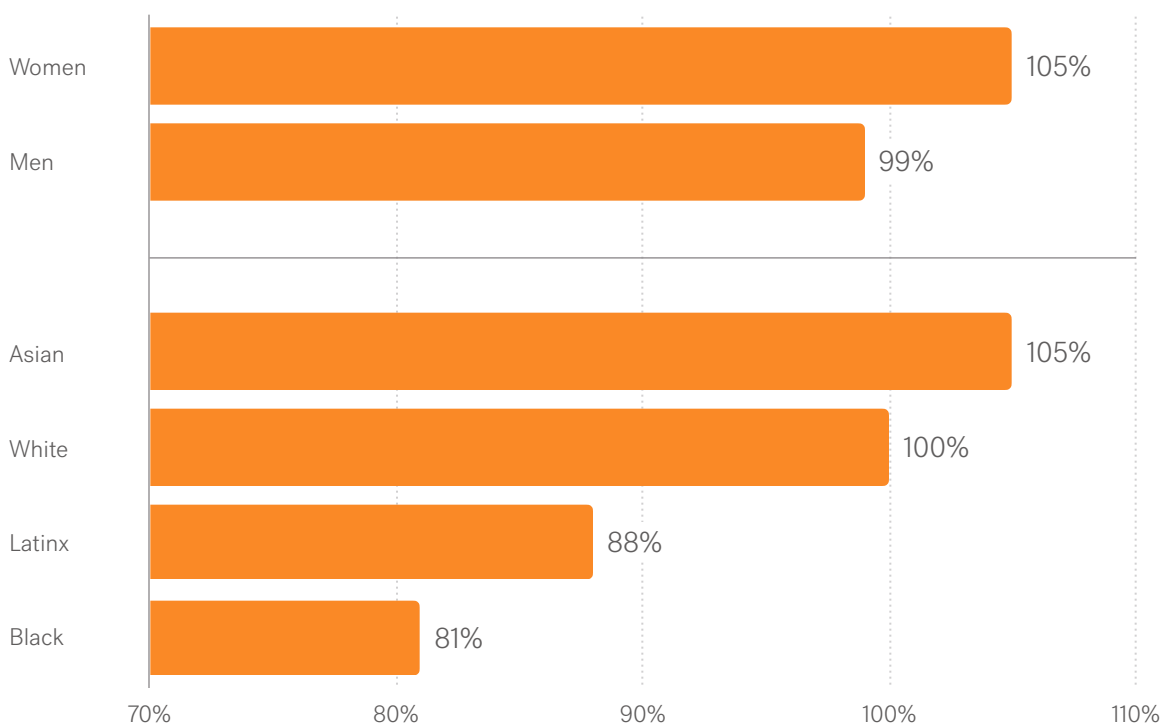
However, we also found that many demographic inequities show up across the whole collection of data. This means that they aren't specific to just one organization or its feedback culture. Rather, they offer insight into the kind of feedback that different groups tend to receive regardless of where they work.

WRITTEN PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK

Who gets **the most** feedback?

In some organizations, employees may only receive a few hundred words of written performance feedback every year. In other organizations, they may receive thousands of words every single quarter. But even across these different feedback cultures, some demographic groups just get more feedback than others regardless of where they work.

Amount of feedback received compared to company average

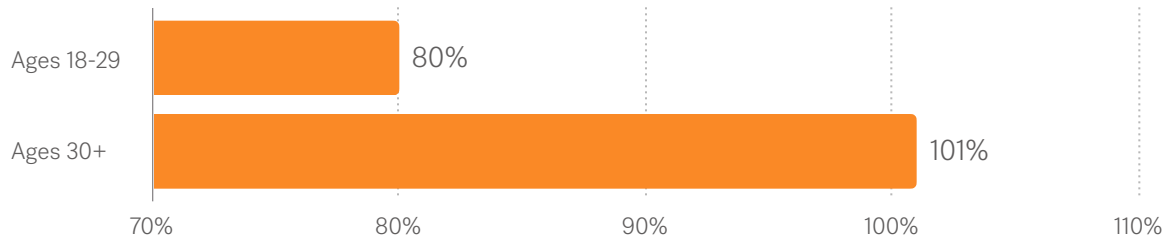


Word count per person as a percentage of employer average; includes large and mid-sized company data sets

There is a small difference by gender: women get slightly more feedback than men. However, race is where the biggest differences emerge. Asian people get more feedback than people of any other race—25% more than white people, the next closest group. Black men get the least written feedback of all, receiving only 68 words of written feedback for every 100 words received by white women. Age is also a big factor: younger workers get less feedback than those over 30.*

*See the methodology notes at the end of this report for details on demographic groupings used in this report.

Amount of feedback received compared to company average



Word count per person as a percentage of employer average; includes only the mid-sized company data set

Not all feedback is helpful, but on average, people who get more feedback have a career advantage. Several researchers have shown that people whose managers invest the time to provide them clear written feedback about their work grow faster in their careers. For instance, academic researchers John Hattie and Helen Timperley find that people who receive well-structured, constructive feedback learn faster and perform better on subsequent assessments, while negative feedback without context impairs learning.

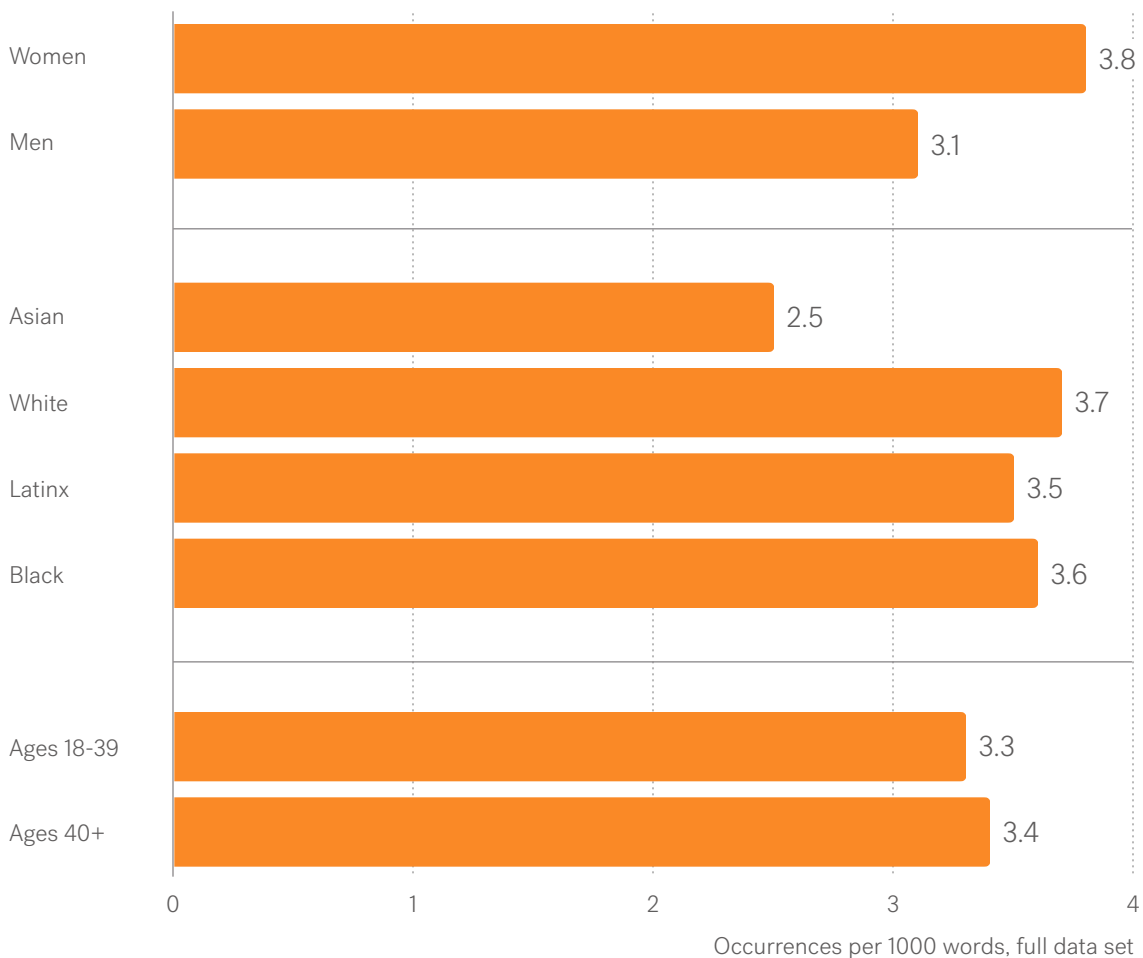
In other words, when one demographic group consistently receives less feedback than others, they have fewer opportunities for professional growth and advancement. Systemic demographic difference in access to feedback is a major issue for any organization that is committed to equity.

WRITTEN PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK

Who gets **personality** feedback?

The survey summary above reveals that some people report getting more personality feedback than others. Are they correct? The written feedback received by 25,000 people indicates that they are.

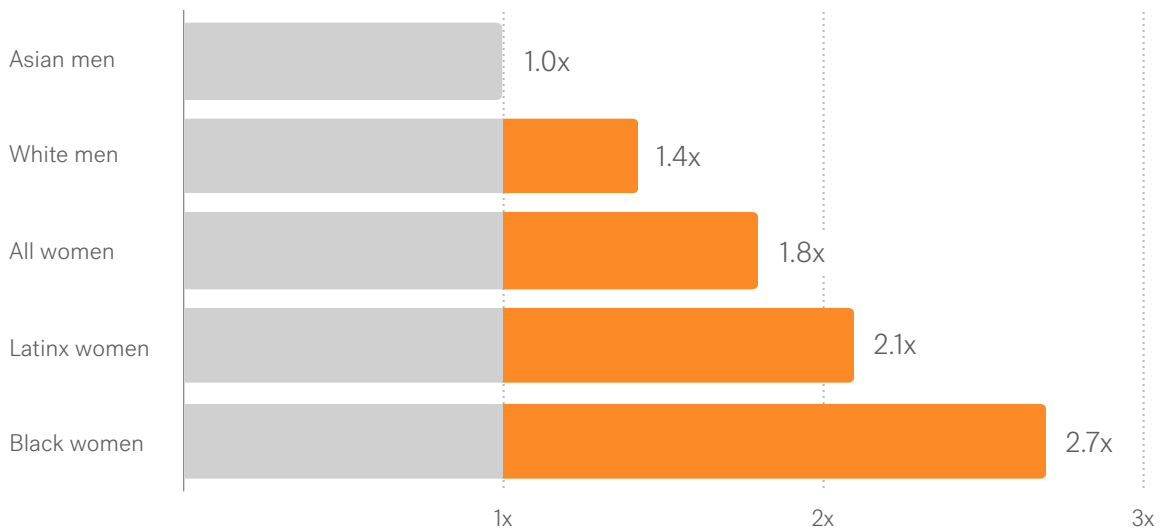
Frequency of personality feedback in performance reviews



Across the board, women get 22% more personality feedback than men. This includes both positive and negative feedback. Asian people receive less personality feedback than any other racial group. But even among Asian people, there is a pronounced gender gap; Asian men get 30% less personality feedback than Asian women.

In some organizations, these differences are even more pronounced, suggesting that organizational environment may amplify or suppress broader cultural patterns. For instance, in our midsize company data set, Black women receive 2.7 times more personality feedback than Asian men.

Relative frequency of personality feedback in performance reviews at one mid-sized company



Relative frequency compared to lowest group, in ascending order; includes only mid-sized company data set

WRITTEN PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK

Who gets actionable feedback?

One problem with personality feedback is that it is rarely actionable, especially compared to feedback that is more focused on someone's work or behaviors. **You are often annoying** isn't especially useful feedback; by contrast, **you often interrupt people in meetings** identifies a specific behavior that someone can observe and work on.

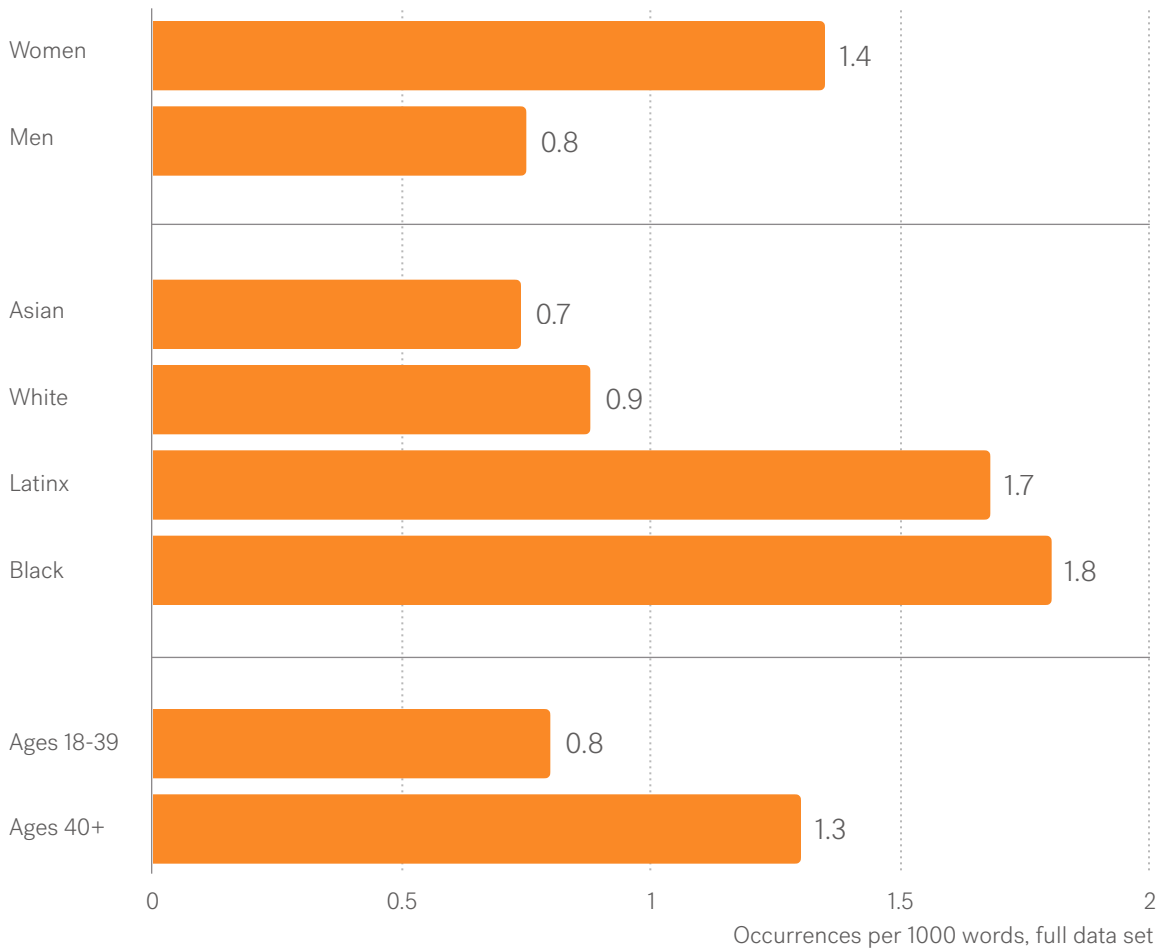
The most actionable feedback is specific, but it goes further than that; it includes examples. Frequently, the most actionable feedback also shows the recipient an alternative to their current approach. Compare the following three pieces of feedback:

- “You often interrupt people in meetings.”
- “You often interrupt people in meetings. In last month's project review, your teammate was trying to share a perspective on our launch date. She never got to finish her observations because you interrupted her and changed the topic.”
- “You often interrupt people in meetings. In last month's project review, your teammate was trying to share a perspective on our launch date. She never got to finish her observations because you interrupted her and changed the topic. If you find that you're talking a lot in a meeting, it's worthwhile to intentionally pause from time to time and ask the group whether anyone else has a perspective to share. This way you make space for other voices.”

All three pieces of feedback include a behavioral observation, and all are better than **you are often annoying**. However, the third is the most actionable.

Given the relationship between actionable feedback and growth, the fact that some groups consistently receive less actionable feedback than others is problematic. Writing in [Harvard Business Review](#), Shelley J. Correll and Caroline Simard report that “[w]omen are systematically less likely to receive specific feedback tied to outcomes, both when they receive praise and when the feedback is developmental. In other words, 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.”

Frequency of performance feedback that isn't actionable



Our data shows impact by race and age as well as gender.

The people receiving the least actionable feedback tend to be the least represented in business overall and in leadership in particular. For every piece of feedback that's not actionable received by white men under 40, women over 40 receive 4.4; Black women (across age groups) receive 8.8.

It's hard for people to grow into leadership positions without receiving clear and actionable feedback along the way. When we give some groups that opportunity and not others, we perpetuate harmful inequities.

WRITTEN PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK

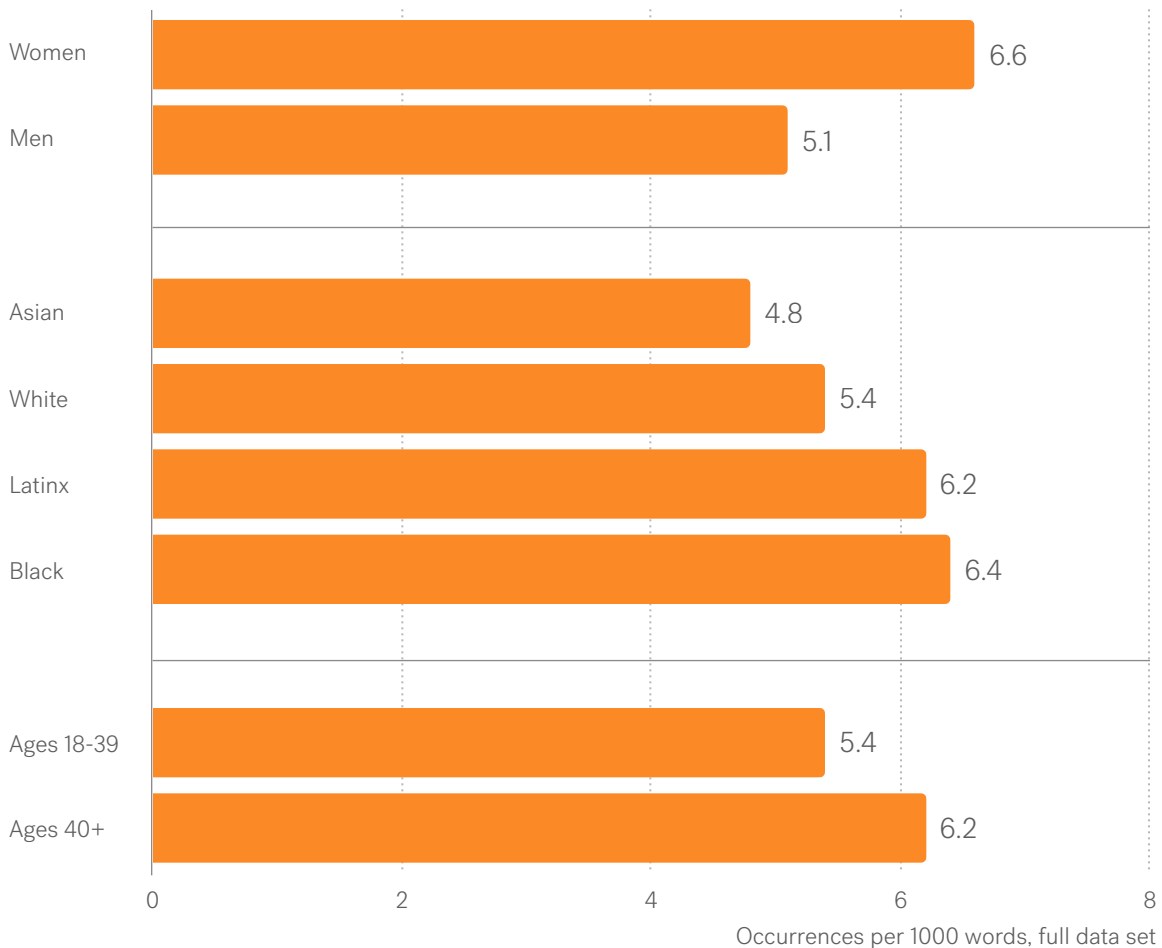
Who gets **exaggerated** feedback?

In performance reviews, it's common to find statements like:

- You **never** show up on time.
- You **always** bring a curious mindset to every conversation.
- You're **constantly** looking for ways to improve things.

In reality, statements like these aren't generally true. The writer, trying to drive home their point, is expressing their feedback in an unrealistic, extreme way. Even the most improvement-minded person in the world likely isn't "constantly" looking for ways to improve; that coworker who's known for coming late to meetings still shows up on time occasionally.

Frequency of exaggerations in performance feedback



The issues become especially clear when we look at who tends to receive the most exaggerated feedback: women, Black and Latinx people, and people over 30. Younger, male and whiter or more Asian people receive less exaggerated feedback overall—and not coincidentally, these are the same groups that often grow fastest in their careers.

Managers often write exaggerated feedback because they're trying to emphasize a point. In actuality, communicating with this kind of hyperbole may undermine the credibility of their observation, making it less likely they their feedback will be heard. The negative impact of exaggerated feedback on employee performance (and rank-based feedback more broadly) has been known for several decades, starting with [pioneering research](#) by Douglas A. Johnson. More recently, Kristen Intemann finds that exaggerating the impact of a scientific finding (“hype”) [reduces public confidence](#) in the finding.

This is another case where there are clear differences in the type of feedback received by different groups. The most underrepresented groups are getting the least credible feedback.

WRITTEN PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK

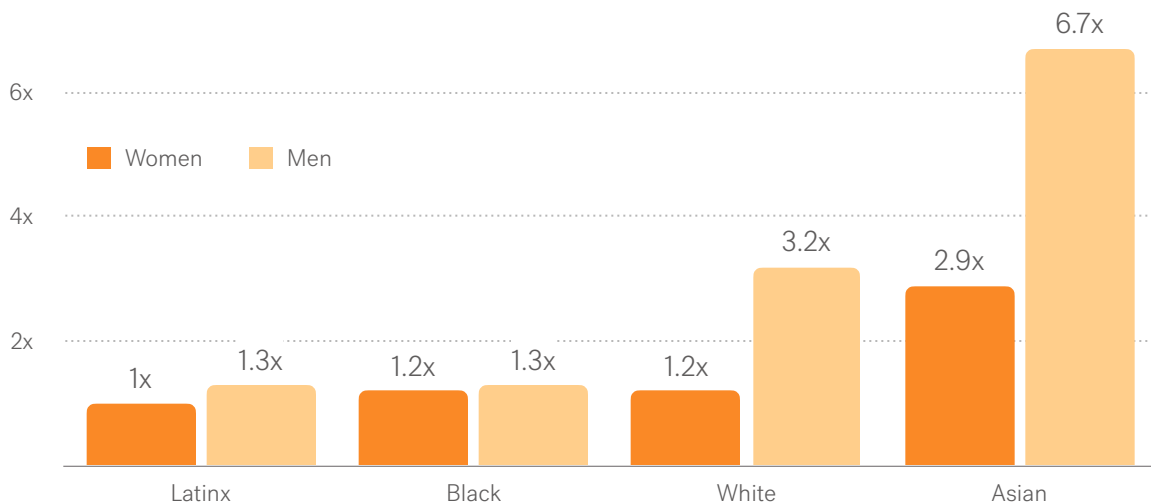
Who gets **fixed mindset** feedback?

Traditional business environments have historically considered people in terms of relatively fixed characteristics; someone doing a good job might be described as **highly intelligent**, while someone who chronically misses deadlines might be described as **naturally slow-paced**. This way of thinking about people presupposes that how they perform on the job is largely a matter of innate characteristics that they were born with.

In recent years, more business leaders have adopted Carol Dweck's research, trying to build teams that cultivate a growth mindset rather than focusing on people's fixed characteristics. The idea is that growth is powered by a strong work ethic and an appetite for learning; anyone can grow if they are open to feedback and work hard at it.

Still, it's common for performance feedback to comment on people's fixed characteristics. This is true across demographic groups and it's problematic for everyone. However, the specific characteristics that show up vary widely by demographic. This is most clearly illustrated in our diverse community data set.

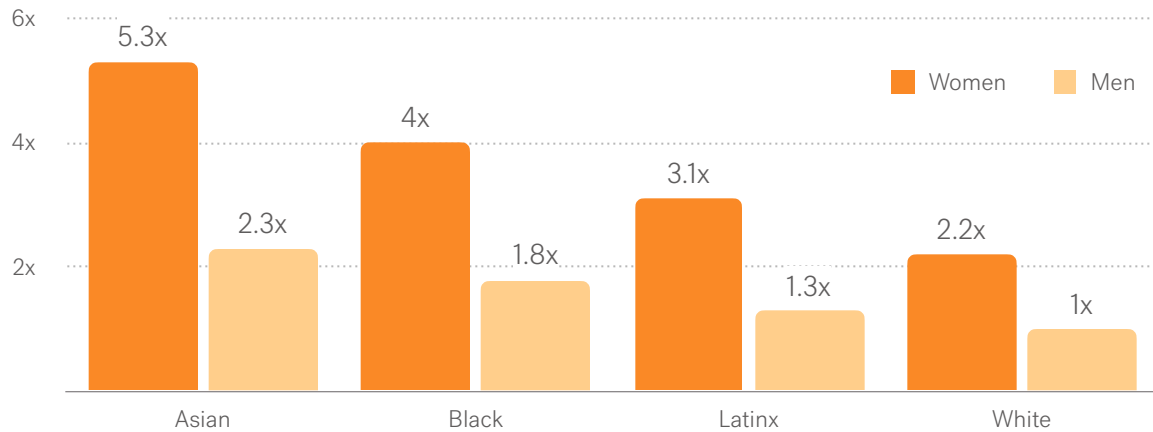
Frequency of "brilliant" and "genius" in performance feedback



Relative frequency compared to lowest group, in ascending order; includes only the community data set

Men are 3.5 times more likely than women to be described as **brilliant** or **genius**, and people under 40 are described this way much more often than those over 40. Feedback about Asian people and white people includes these terms massively more often than feedback about Black and Latinx people.

Frequency of “overachiever” in performance feedback



Relative frequency compared to lowest group, in descending order; includes only the community data set

On the other hand, the fixed mindset term **overachiever**—typically applied to strong performers transcending low expectations—is much more frequently applied to women and people of color. In the eyes of the feedback provider, **brilliant geniuses** are expected to perform well; **overachievers** perform well despite having inherent limitations.

The encoded message underneath these patterns is both biased and clear: Some groups are credited with more baseline talent than others. This plays out not just in written feedback, but in opportunities for challenging stretch assignments and promotion rates over time.

Summing it all up

Why does this matter?

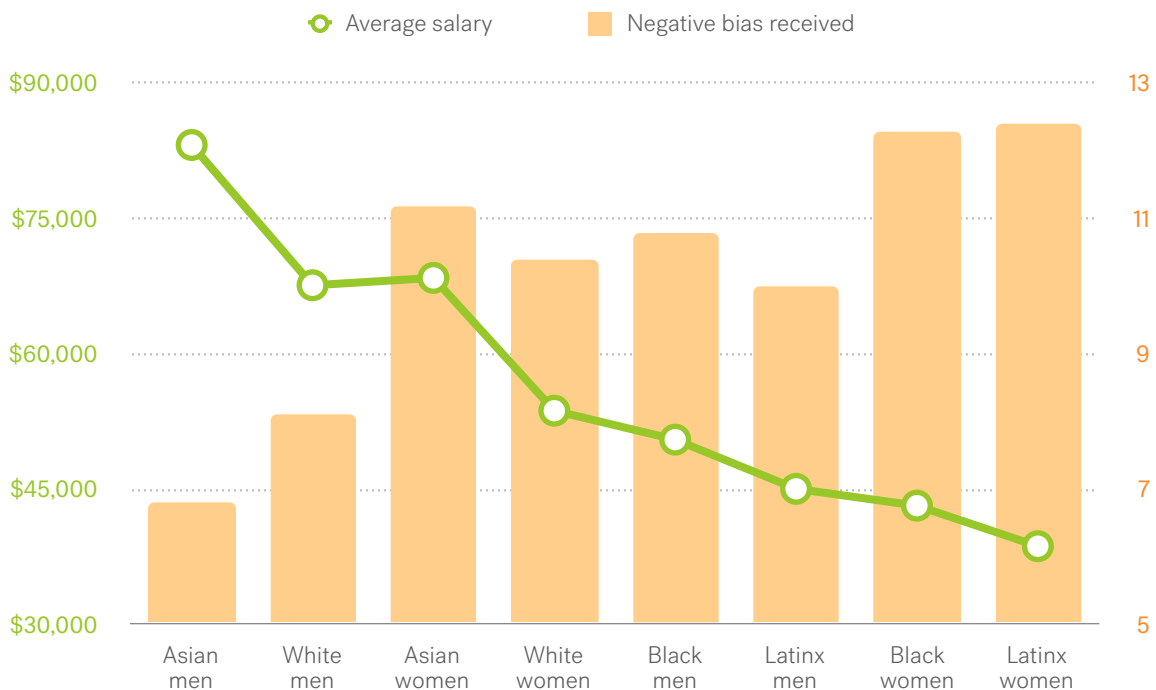
High-quality feedback about someone's performance offers them more opportunities to grow. When a group of people systematically receives feedback that is lower quality, we expect to see this manifest in disparate career opportunities and outcomes.

Over the last several years, more organizations are looking seriously at pay gap data, or the average difference in earnings between people of different genders and races. In 2021, the American Association of University Women published a data update to their landmark 2017 study showing significant differences in pay by both gender and race.

In the 2021 update, the highest-paid group, Asian men, earned more than double the lowest-paid groups, Black and Latinx women. In other words, the people that consistently receive the most problematic feedback at work also have the lowest pay.

This is a stark reminder not only that feedback matters, but of just how much it matters.

Average salary vs. biased performance feedback

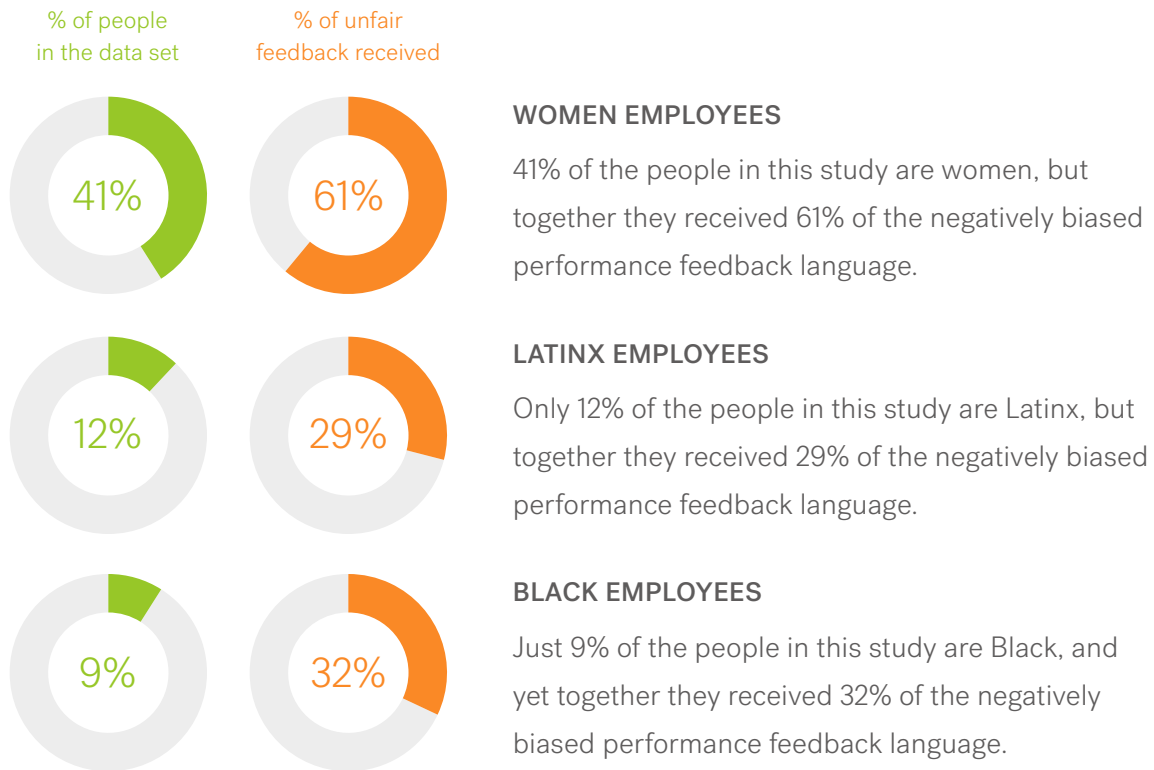


Occurrences of biased language per 1000 words mapped against AAUW salary data; full data set

SUMMING IT ALL UP

Now what?

In both the survey data and the document data, we find inequities. In the survey data, the people most underrepresented in business today, and especially in leadership, report receiving lower quality feedback; the document data from 25,000 people shows that they really do. The inequities show up by gender, by race, and in several cases by age as well.



Total incidents of personality-based, exaggerated, and non-actionable feedback; includes full data set

When people receive low-quality feedback over a long period of time, it changes their opportunity to grow and advance in their careers. It's unsurprising that the people receiving the least and lowest quality feedback are also consistently the least represented in corporate C-suites and boards.

It's not enough to accept this as the status quo. We can, and should, address these inequities. If you're a manager or a people leader, you can be mindful that you're providing all your employees consistently structured feedback that is specific, actionable, and focused on their work rather than on their personality or fixed characteristics.

If you're an employee, you can't control the kind of feedback that you receive, nor should it be your responsibility to do so. But you can ask focused questions that move your feedback conversations to a more useful place for your long-term development:

- **Can you give me a couple of recent examples?**
- **Can you describe another way I could approach that?**
- **What specific changes would you recommend that I make?**

In recent years, organizations of all types have not only prioritized DEI policies and initiatives but have also been increasing budgets to support them. This study's findings should illustrate, however, that it's a far easier task to rewrite policies that elevate DEI's importance on paper than it is to reshape the attitudes of those who are required to turn DEI into a reality on the job.

Everyone deserves thoughtful and actionable professional feedback. Not everyone receives it. If we address the differences in the kinds of feedback that different people receive, we can begin to address even more significant inequities: access to career growth, earning power, advancement, and leadership.

Methodology

SURVEY COMPONENT

In the Spring of 2022, we surveyed a wide range of people on the feedback they recall receiving at work to determine if different groups of people are experiencing work feedback differently. We also examined actual language patterns within people's real performance feedback documents to ascertain whether different groups of people are getting different kinds of feedback on the job.

PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK DATA ANALYSIS

This report's analysis considers documented performance feedback received by more than 25,000 people. Three separate data sets are included:

- The large company data set. This data set includes performance feedback and demographics from 13,007 people all working for the same large organization.
- The mid-sized company data set. This data set includes performance feedback and demographics from 2,857 people all working for the same mid-sized organization.
- The community data set. This data set includes performance feedback and demographics from 10,012 people who work for 250+ different organizations.

INCLUSION AND DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPINGS

The demographic categories shown in this report reflect the most accurate groupings available from the original data sources. Some demographic representations are small or missing entirely in the source data. In reality, gender isn't binary, and race and ethnicity can't be reduced to a handful of categories. Indeed, one of the challenges of studying social bias in the workplace is the fact that demographic data collection is generally too reductive, limiting our ability to identify potentially significant patterns of discrimination within these broader groups. It's our hope that publishing studies like this one will spur companies to collect more detailed demographic data.

For more information or questions about Textio's research, please reach out to us at research@textio.com.