



Language Bias in Performance Feedback 2024

DATA ANALYSIS AND SURVEY RESULTS



Key findings

This year's research expanded on previous years' findings to understand the impact of bad and biased feedback on individual and team performance. Does stereotype threat influence what feedback a person internalizes? Do high performers get more or better feedback? We found stereotypical comments stick more than others, and performing at the highest levels often means you get the least useful feedback.

High performers get problematic feedback

- High performers get 1.5x **more feedback** than everyone else
- High performers get the **most exaggerated feedback** of all workers
- High performers receive **fixed-mindset feedback** 2.6x more often than low performers

Gender bias is internalized

- Men are 2-4x as likely to internalize **positive stereotypes** about themselves
- Women are 7x as likely to internalize **negative stereotypes** about themselves
- 56% of women recall being described as **unlikable**, vs. 31% of non-binary people and just 16% of men
- 78% of women recall being negatively described as **emotional**, vs. 23% of non-binary people and only 11% of men

Racial bias is internalized

- About half of white and Asian people recall being described as **intelligent**, vs. just 18% of Black people and 17% of Hispanic/Latino people
- White people are more than twice as likely to recall being called **likable** compared to almost every other group
- 30% of South Asian people recall being called **difficult**, vs. just 9% of East Asian people
- More than 60% of Hispanic/Latino and Black people recall being negatively described as **emotional**, vs. just 21% of white people and 11% of East Asian people

“Overachiever” and “underachiever” are biased labels

- Women and Asian people are 2x as likely to internalize the **overachiever** label
- Men are 3x as likely to recall being described as an **underachiever**
- White people are up to 11x more likely to recall being described as an **underachiever**

In ten years, what has changed?

It's hard to imagine today, but ten years ago, few business leaders were thinking about language in the workplace. Today everyone is talking about workplace communication. A decade ago, it was barely on the map.

The language revolution started in August 2014, with a viral article in *Fortune* by soon-to-be founding CEO of Textio, Kieran Snyder. The article presented real data about gender bias in performance reviews. Real data is much harder to ignore than isolated anecdotes.

The article set off an avalanche. Within 48 hours of publishing, Kieran received 1,500 messages from leaders of all genders who were grateful, skeptical, and angry. Over the next few years, numerous additional researchers, both academics and practitioners, replicated the data insights from the original article.

At Textio, finding trends and biases in workplace language has been formative for us. For a decade, we've been publishing deep insights from our data sets and building software to help leaders remedy the gaps in their organizations. The landscape has changed markedly in that time. When we started, few leaders even knew how to collect meaningful data about bias in their organizations, let alone fix it.

Ten years later, most organizations have people leaders who are not only conversant with this language data, but accountable for changing the patterns within the organizations. These days, by default, modern people leaders collect detailed, quantitative data about which teams and demographics are getting which kinds of feedback, and they help managers take action to improve.

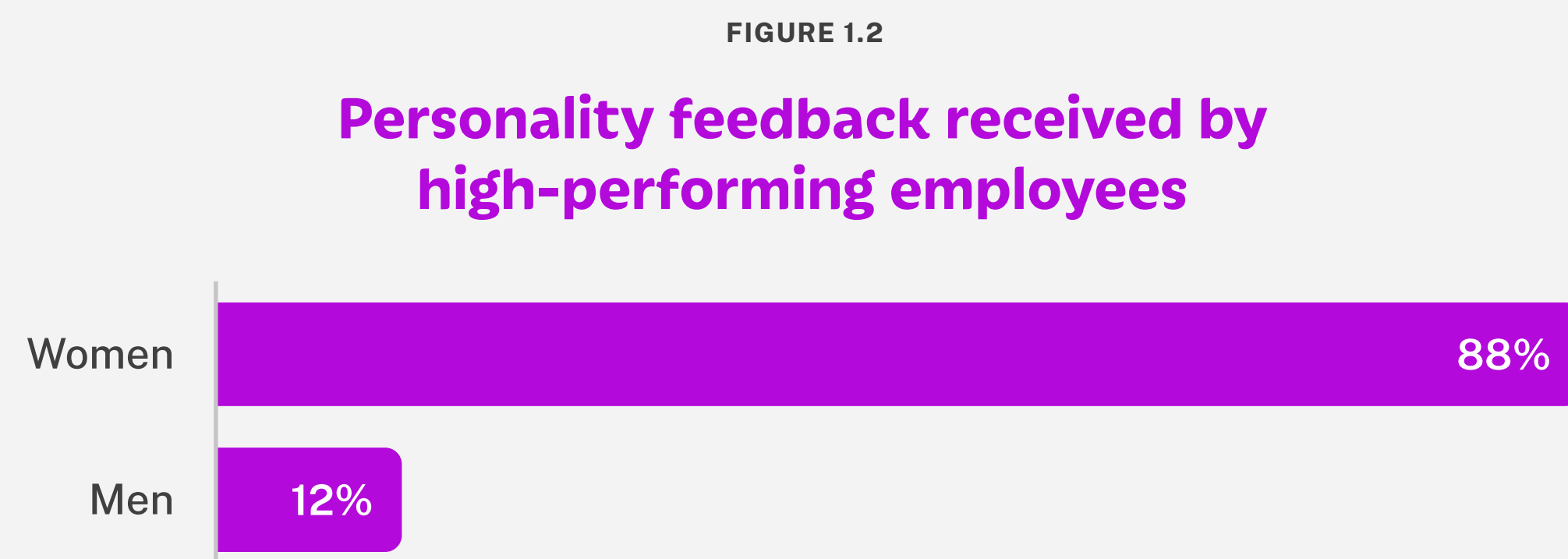
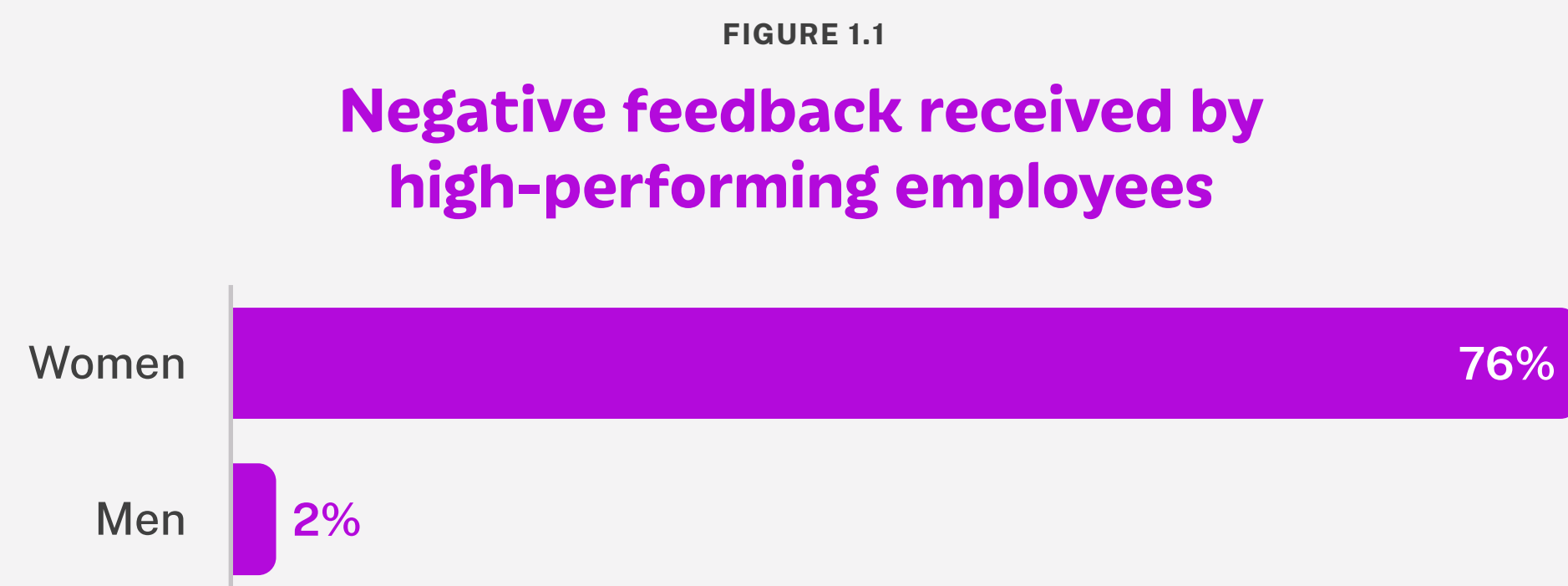
But how much has really changed in the data itself? Before we dive into this year's data, let's review the research that got us here.

THE ORIGINAL 2014 STUDY

Strong gender bias in performance review language

The 2014 data started a revolution because it was stark. While high-performing men and women both received critical feedback, the women were significantly more likely to receive critical feedback that was overtly negative rather than constructive.

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. (Figure 1.1)



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. (Figure 1.2)

Furthermore, manager gender was not significant in these findings. Both men and women gave similarly biased feedback.

Numerous other studies have reported similar insights over the last several years. In 2020, 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 most recent [Women in The Workplace](#) survey from Leanin.org and McKinsey & Co, 27% of Black women have had their judgment questioned within their area of expertise. This is in contrast to only 17% of men. The 2018 research reported that 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.

In 2022, Textio followed up on this by publishing [the largest study of its kind](#): a deep dive into performance reviews received by over 25,000 people at 253 different organizations. We found stark patterns of inequity by race, gender, and age.

TEXTIO'S 2022 REPORT

Inequities by race, gender, and age

The findings in Textio's 2022 report were striking: women, Black and Hispanic/Latino people, and people over 40 systematically receive significantly lower-quality feedback at work than their coworkers.

Women consistently get feedback about their personalities rather than their work, and personality feedback is stereotyped

Overall, women receive 22% more personality feedback than men do. Across all groups, the personality feedback itself shows significant stereotype bias. For example, women are more likely to be called *collaborative*, *helpful*, and *nice*; men are more likely to be called *confident* and *ambitious*. (Figure 1.3, page 7)

Personality feedback is stereotyped among racial groups too. For instance, Black people are most likely to be called *passionate* and least likely to be called *ambitious*, while for Asian people it is just the opposite. The personality feedback received by different racial groups is strikingly different, even in formal performance reviews. (Figure 1.4)

Leaders have higher expectations for white and Asian men

Not only do white and Asian men receive the highest-quality feedback overall, they are also significantly more likely to be described with terms like *brilliant* and *genius*. Managers are more likely to identify white and Asian men as possessing innate intellectual ability than they are all other groups. (Figure 1.5, page 8)

Meanwhile, the fixed-mindset term *overachiever*—typically applied to good performers transcending low expectations—is most frequently applied to women of color. Managers do not cite innate intellectual ability when reviewing the achievements of Black and Latina women. (Figure 1.6, page 8)

FIGURE 1.4

Personality feedback language received by race/ethnicity

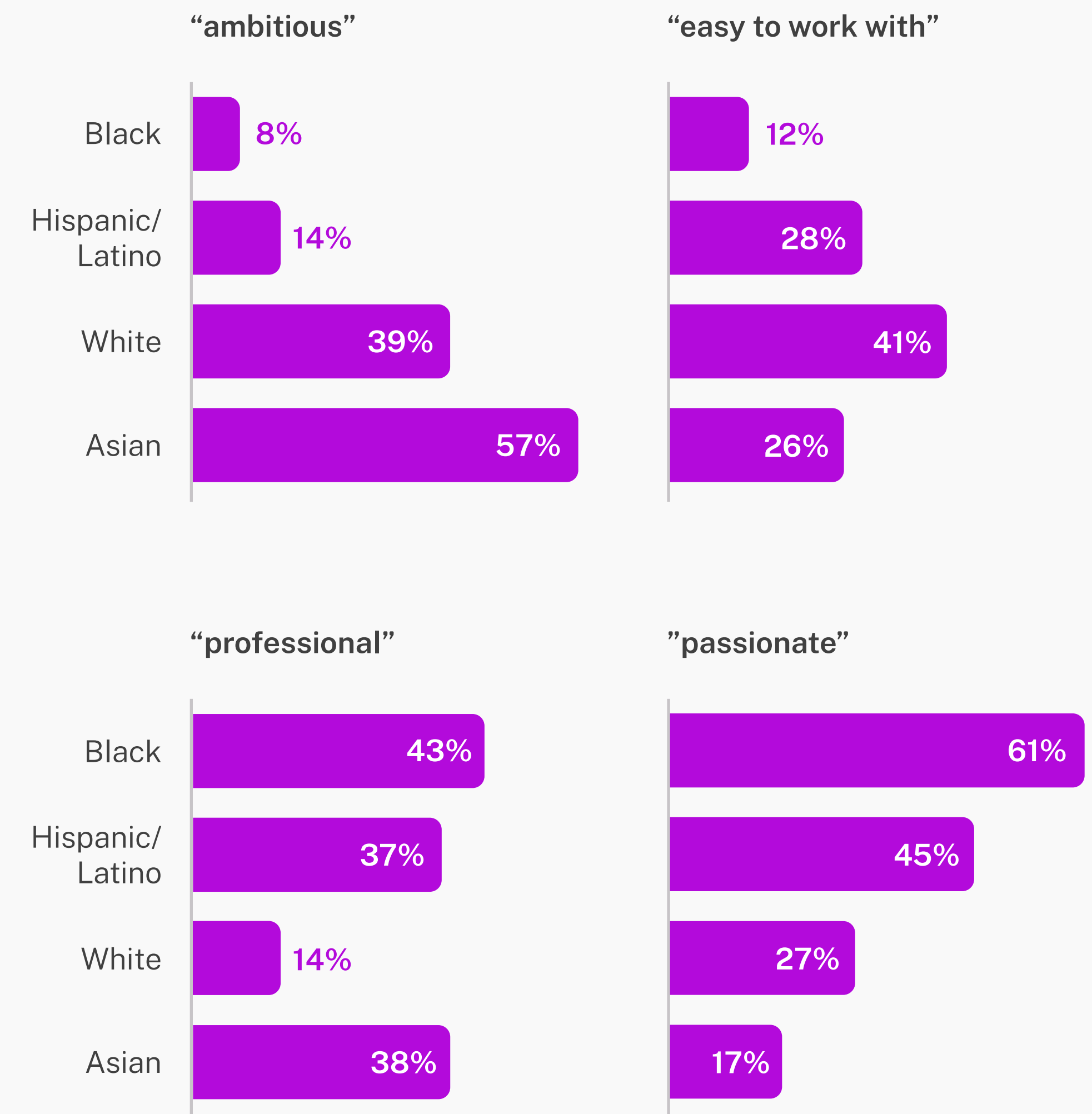
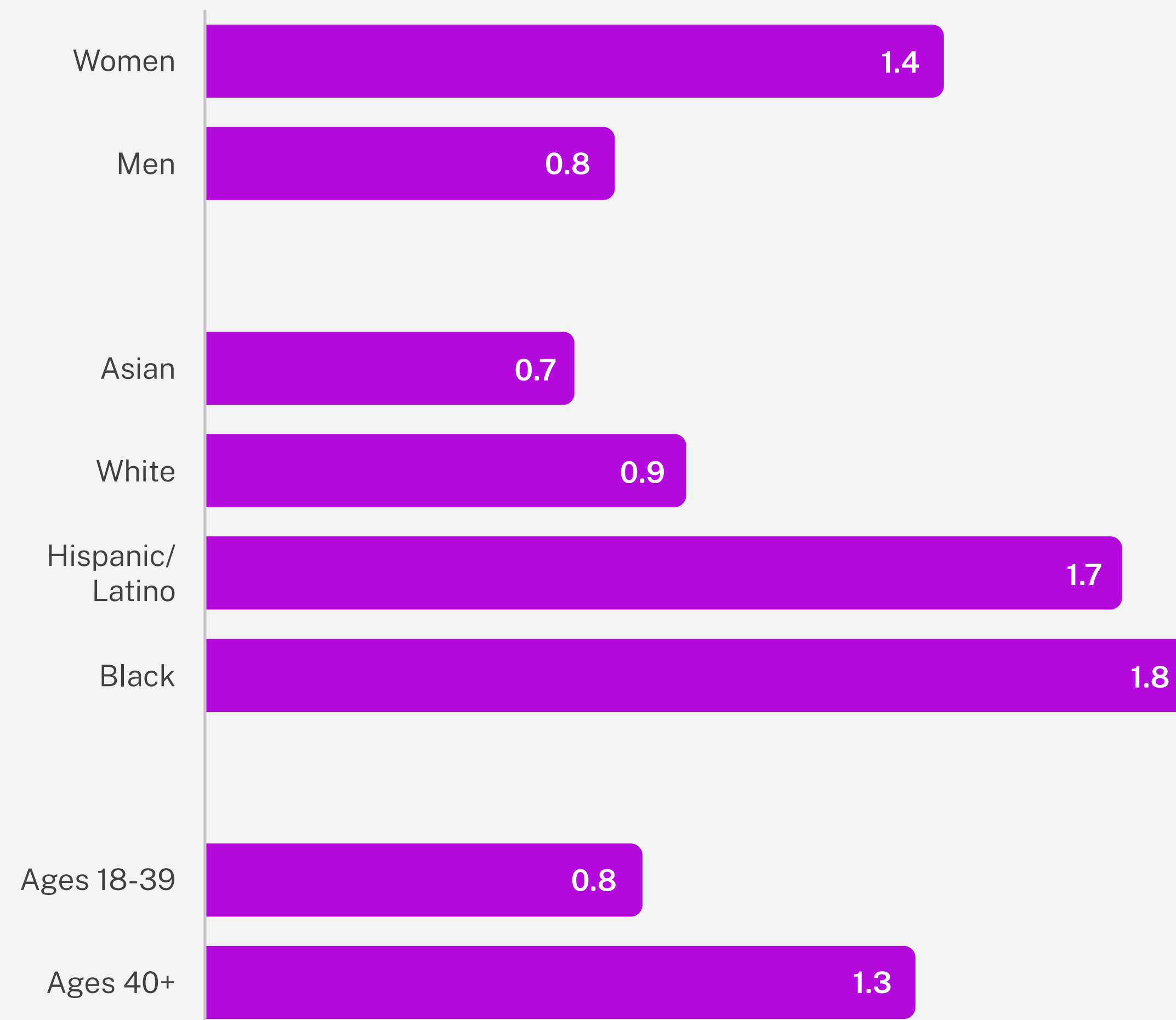


FIGURE 1.7
Frequency of performance feedback that isn't actionable

Occurrences per 1000 words, full data set



Not everyone gets feedback they can use

The best feedback is specific, relevant, and actionable; good feedback comes with clear examples and clear suggestions for improvement. But women receive almost twice as much unactionable feedback as men, and Black people receive more than twice as much unactionable feedback as their white and Asian coworkers. (Figure 1.7)

This is particularly problematic because people who receive actionable feedback have significantly more opportunity to learn and improve, which over time creates greater pay and promotion opportunities. When some groups get more actionable feedback than others, it sets up a foundational inequity that underlies the entire performance management and compensation system.

The patterns of bias emerged clearly in the 2022 data. So in 2023, we turned our attention to looking at the impact of these patterns. Working with two very large data sets, we found that people who get low-quality feedback—even when that feedback is positive in nature—are 63% more likely to quit within 12 months.

TEXTIO'S 2023 REPORT

People who get low-quality feedback quit

In 2023, Textio dove into [the connection between feedback quality and employee retention and attrition](#). First, we used survey data to understand people's job-hunting behaviors and desire to quit.

Across all participants, 76% of people agree that they have a good understanding of the skills their manager expects them to demonstrate to earn their next promotion, or are neutral; 13% of people actively disagree. But the actual numbers vary widely by gender and race. For men, 83% say that they understand what's required to earn their next promotion, in contrast to only 71% of women and people of other genders.

For white people, 80% understand what's required, but only 54% of Asian people do. (Figure 1.8, page 8)

These findings are striking, if not entirely surprising.

When people receive low-quality feedback, they are more likely to quit

We've established that underrepresented people get lower-quality feedback. Textio's 2023 report also found that these groups say that they're less likely to be with their current organizations a year from now. If you suspect these are related, and that feedback quality matters to employee retention, you're correct. People who get low-quality feedback are much more likely to leave their roles than those who do not. (Figure 1.9)

It doesn't matter whether the feedback is positive or critical in nature. If it's low-quality, it drives people's desire to look for new roles.

When we look closely at the group that is planning to leave their organizations in the next year, we again see the clear impact of high-quality feedback. Among people planning to stay with their organizations, 61% agree that they understand what their manager expects them to demonstrate in order to earn their next promotion. Among people planning to leave their organizations, only 21% do. (Figure 1.10)

We paired this survey data with performance review data from an intact organization with 13,000 employees across two review cycles. We wanted to see whether the quality of feedback an employee received in year 1 had a relationship to their presence in the organization in year 2.

It turns out the answer is yes: people who receive poor-quality feedback are 63% more likely to leave the organization within the upcoming year than people who receive more actionable input from their managers. In fact, the 2023 report shows that, when we isolate other causes of attrition in the data, 10% of all employee attrition is typically **caused by** low-quality feedback.

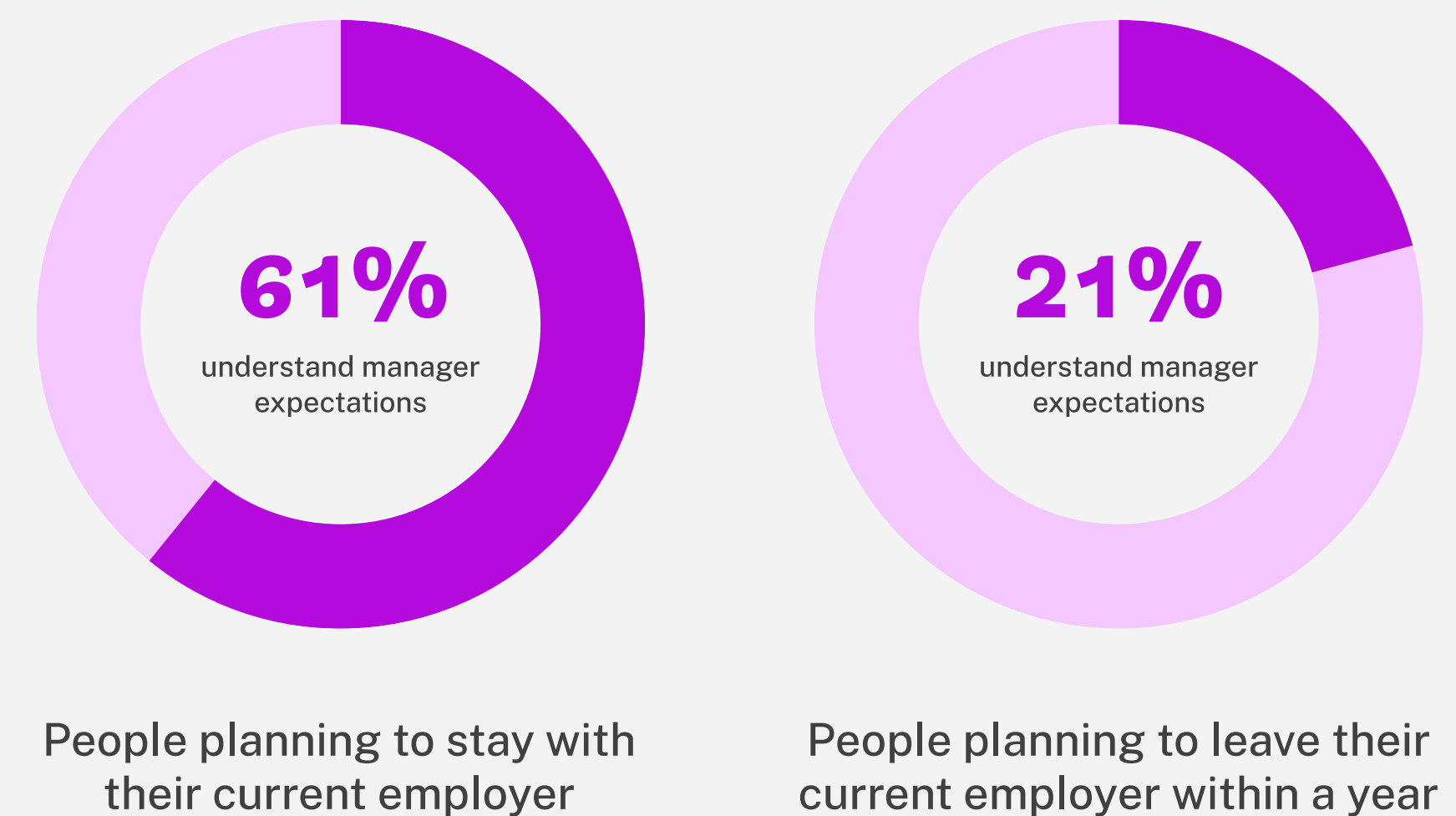
FIGURE 1.9

Low-quality feedback makes your team want to quit



FIGURE 1.10

High-quality feedback makes your team want to stay



For representation work, this is particularly devastating. Because of the demographic disparities in which groups receive actionable feedback in the first place, those exiting employees are a lot more likely to come from underrepresented groups.

THIS YEAR'S REPORT

New data on high performers and bias

In summary, Textio's research from the last two years shows two things:

- For all demographics, feedback quality predicts employee retention and attrition
- Some demographic groups of people systematically receive lower-quality feedback than others, and are thus more likely to quit

In light of these results and the ten-year anniversary of the article that kicked off this vein of research, we are returning to the focus of the initial 2014 study. This year we look specifically at the feedback received by an organization's highest performers. Organizations place high value on retaining these employees, so you would expect that they receive the greatest career investment from their managers, including the highest-quality feedback.

This year we are also looking at **feedback internalization** by race and gender: the phenomenon where, regardless of the mix of feedback that an individual receives, they tend to most remember the feedback that most aligns with social stereotypes about their identity.

As this year's data shows, there is still quite a bit of work to be done.

FIGURE 1.3
Personality feedback received, by gender

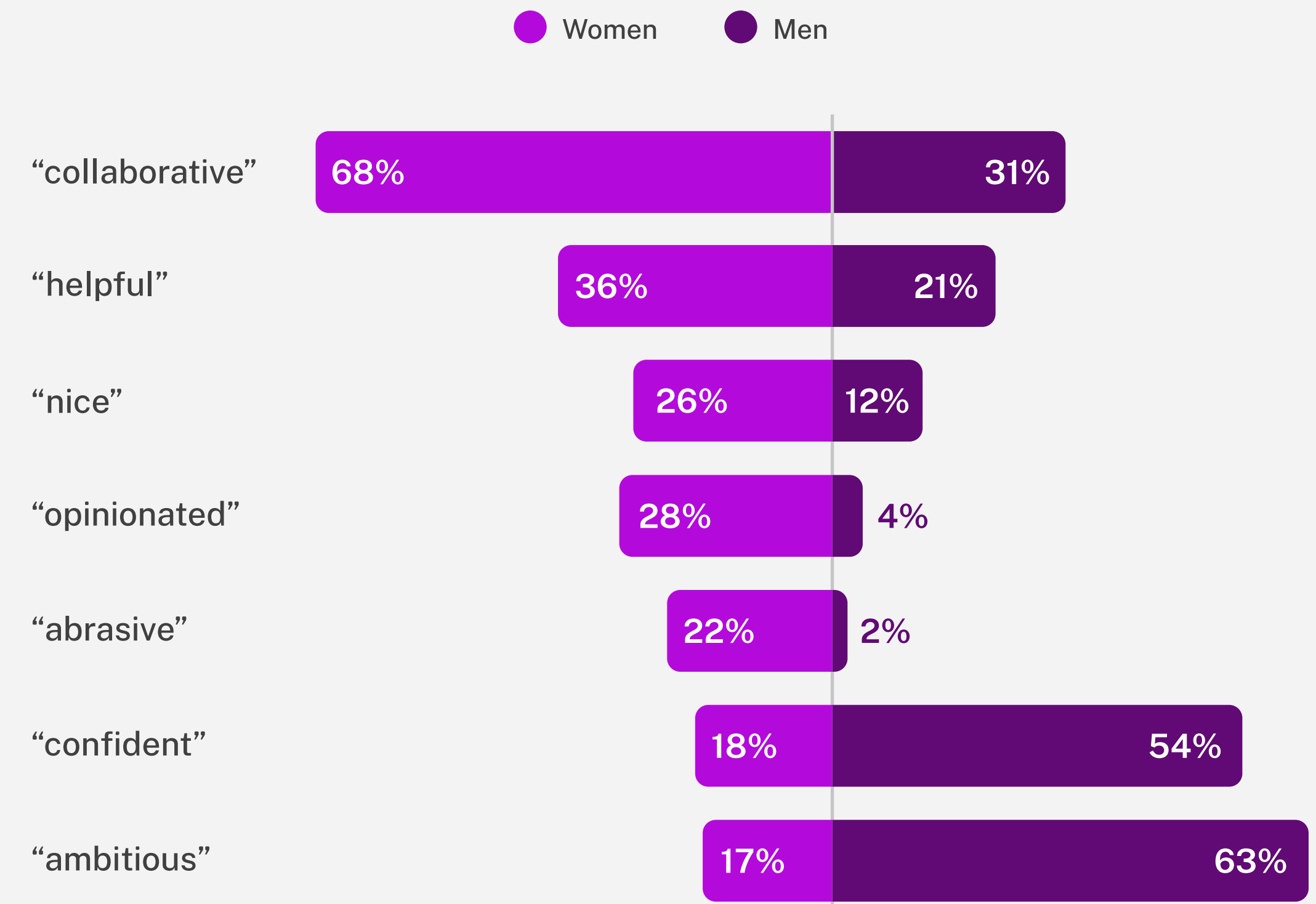
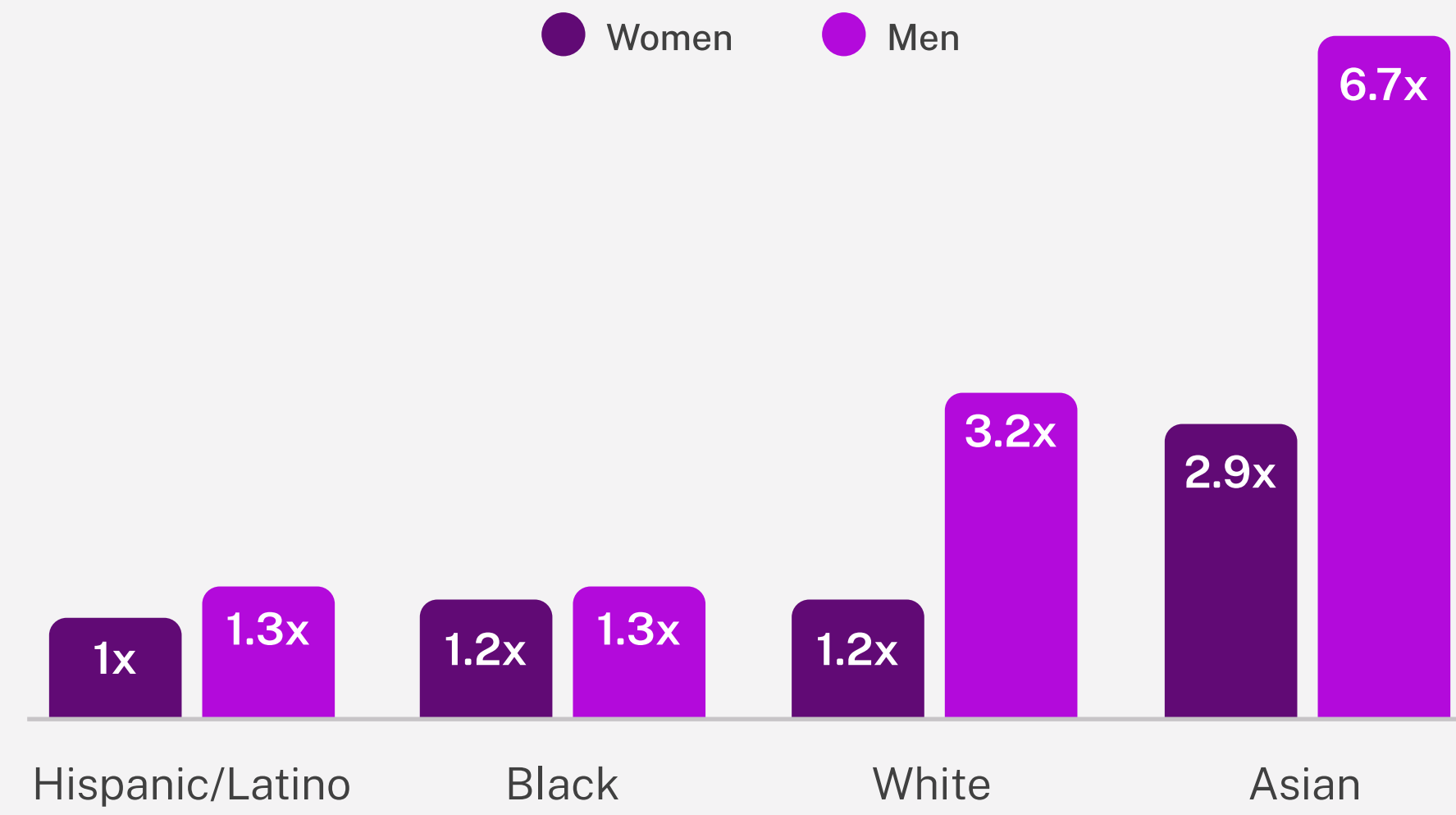


FIGURE 1.5

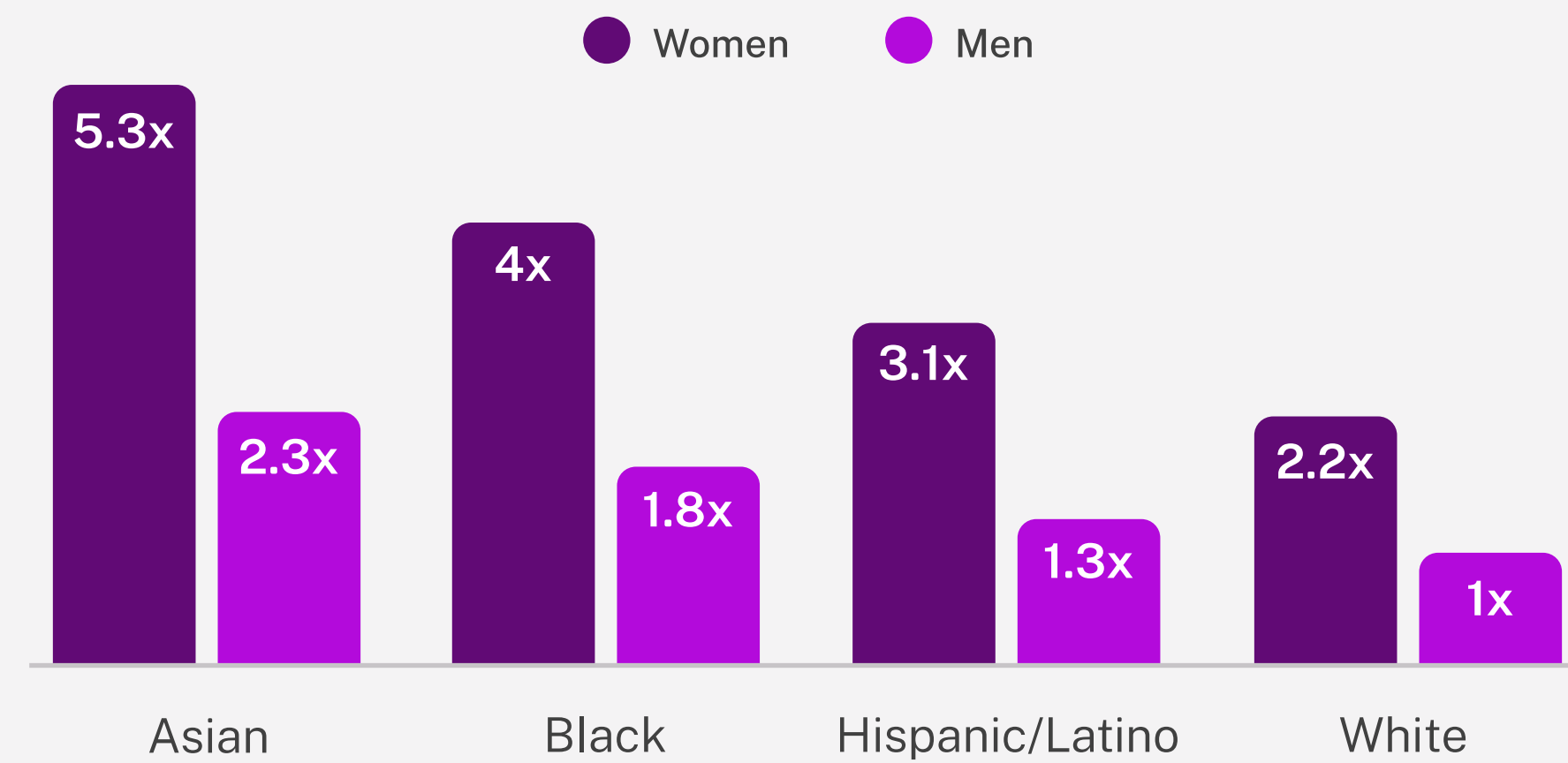
Frequency of “brilliant” and “genius” in performance feedback



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

FIGURE 1.6

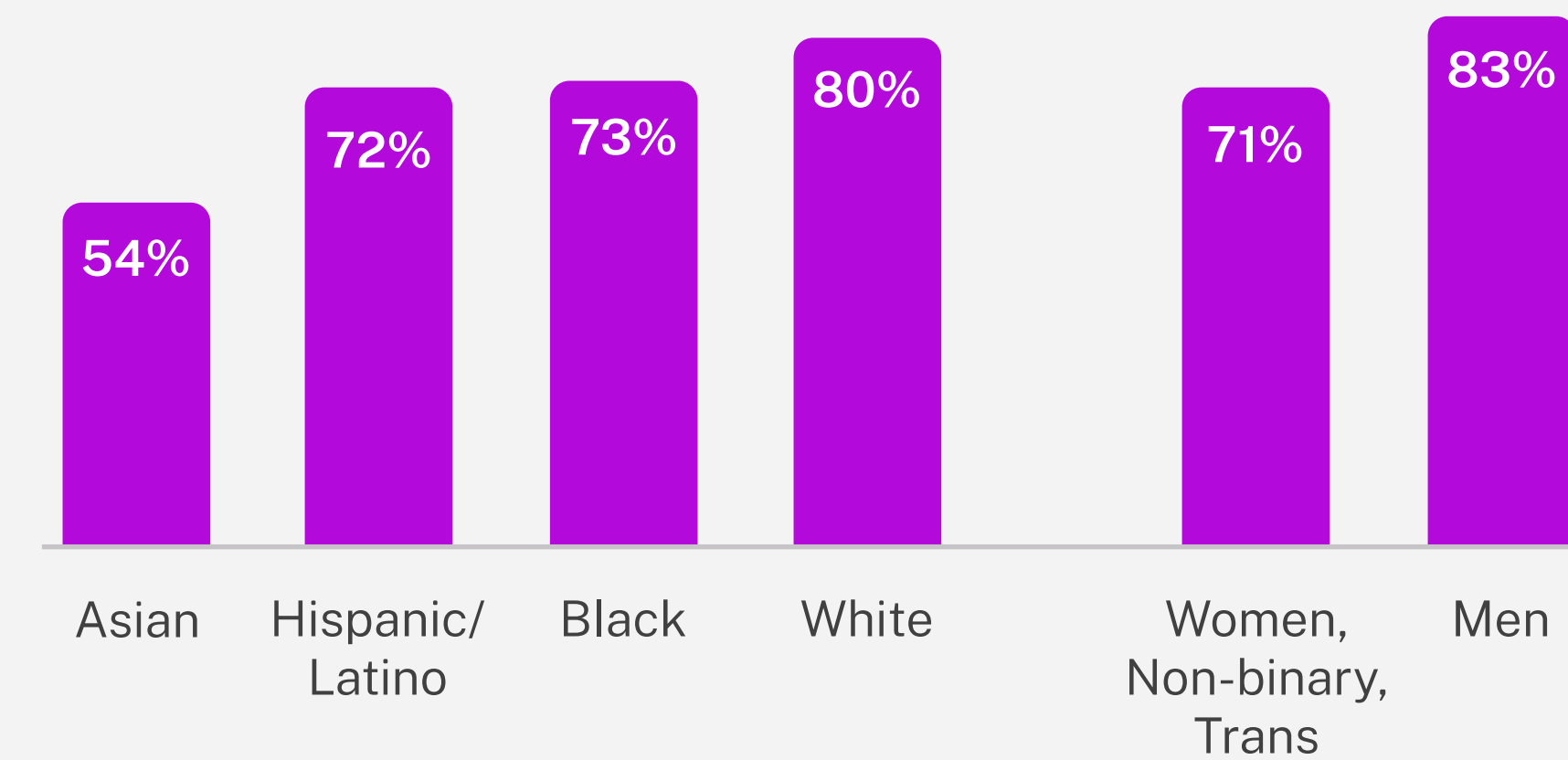
Frequency of “overachiever” in performance feedback



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

FIGURE 1.8

Who gets the highest quality performance feedback?



Percentage of employees who have agreed with the statement: "I have a good understanding of the skills my manager expects me to demonstrate in order to earn my next promotion."

What is a high performer, and what motivates them?

Management teams and HR professionals aim to build systems where all employees can succeed, but high performers get particular attention. High performers are the small number of individuals who are viewed as especially valuable to their teams because they produce consistently high-quality work and contribute positively to team culture. Though the specifics vary across organizations, high performers are typically recognized with top performance assessment scores, given faster paths to promotion, and offered specialized career development mentorship or support.

On average, organizations recognize 5-15% of their employees as high performers. According to HR Dive, these employees are several times more productive than their peers. In the study cited, in an organization where 10% of employees are high performers, those 10% of high-performing employees produce more than 60% of the work of the entire team.

A comprehensive study by Herman Aguinis and Ernest O'Boyle, Jr. from Indiana University found that high performers can deliver 400% more productivity than the average performer. These results were replicated across a wide variety of professional settings. The researchers looked at the performance of more than 600,000 individuals across industries, job types, performance assessment systems, and time horizons. Regardless of setting, high performers delivered highly disproportionate value to their teams.

It is no surprise, then, that organizations work hard to retain these employees. It's not always easy to do so. In a landmark study led by Rice University Professor Jing Zhou and several co-authors, researchers find that a full 30% of top corporate employees leave their firms within one year. This is devastating for any organization.

Why are high performers leaving? The Zhou et al study reports that attrition is especially likely to happen when these top performers feel under-invested in by their manager and colleagues, leading to greater feelings of isolation, disenchantment, and disengagement.

Writing in Harvard Business Review, Karie Willyerd shares that the attrition cycle can be even faster: one in five high-performers intends to leave their jobs within six months. High performers who leave their roles are looking for increased compensation and opportunity. Feedback is at the center of both of these dimensions. Willyerd writes, “Fifty percent of high performers say they expect at least a monthly sit down with their managers, but only 53% say their manager delivers on their feedback expectations.”

This data is truly shocking: only about half of the high performers in Willyerd’s study have a monthly 1-1 with their manager. Asking a manager to meet monthly with an employee is a pretty low bar, yet nearly half of the managers in this study aren’t even clearing it. It’s not surprising that so many of the high performers choose to find work elsewhere!

Even when managers do meet with their employees, they often shy away from giving critical feedback. Especially with high performers where the employee’s delivery is so key to the team’s overall success, managers are wary of saying anything that might cause conflict or employee dissatisfaction. However, this is a mistake, as high performers are more motivated than any other group by receiving constructive feedback. Writing in Harvard Business Review, Amy Gallo notes that giving top stars ongoing constructive feedback is central to keeping them motivated and engaged. In other words, if you avoid giving your highest performers critical feedback, you make it more likely that they will leave, not less.

The other aspect that emerges clearly in the research is that, like low performance and cultural toxicity, high performance is contagious. This is even true in the narrowest physical sense. For instance, Michael Housman and Dylan Minor of Northwestern University looked at the 25-foot radius around high performers at a large technology

firm and found that these workers boosted performance in coworkers by 15 percent.

This makes high performers even more critical to retain—not just for their own productivity contributions, but for the impact they have on the productivity of everyone around them.

If feedback is essential to motivating and retaining high performers, you might expect that these individuals receive the highest quality feedback in their organizations.

This year’s data shows that this is not the case.

Do high performers get high-quality feedback?

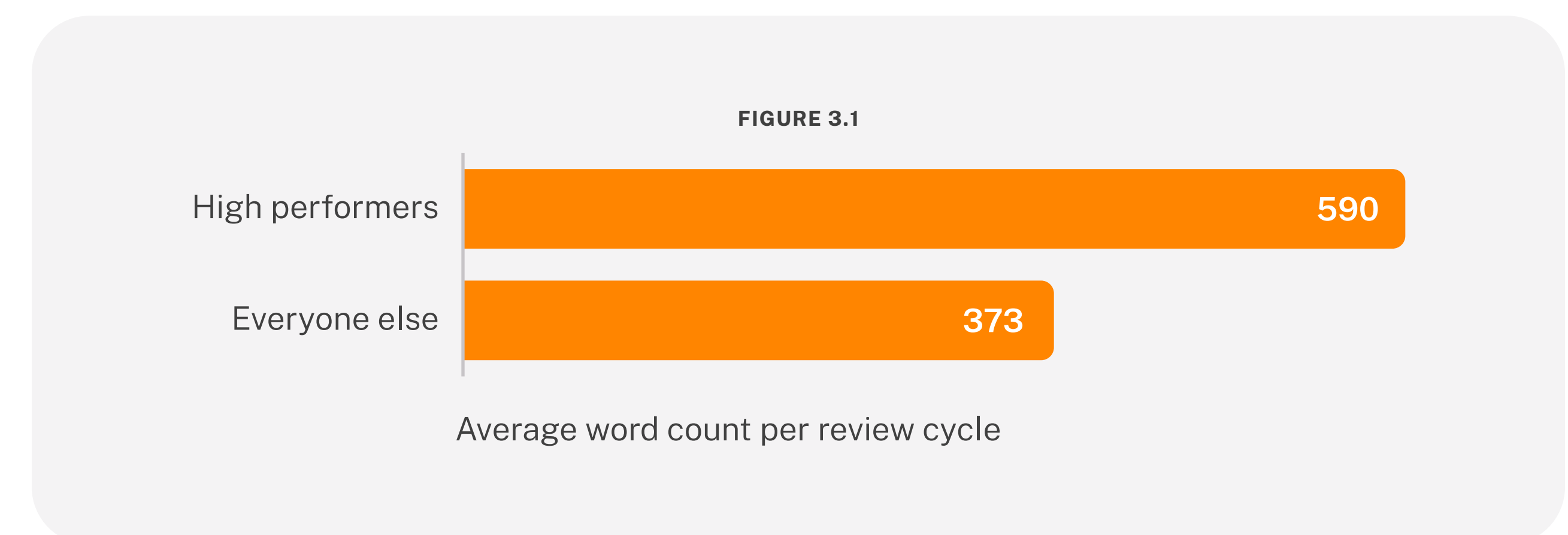
Conventional management wisdom is that you spend 80% of your time managing your highest and lowest performers. If this is true, we would expect to see this reflected in the written feedback that individuals receive: high and low performers ought to receive more feedback than their peers, and we would expect it to be actionable, specific, and clear.

This year's data set includes reviews for more than 23,000 people. In addition to analyzing the demographic patterns in written feedback as we've done for previous reports, this year we also looked at the individual's performance rating. Starting with the rating schema the employer implemented, we placed employees into three groups: high, middle, and low performers. In other words, we didn't have to guess who the high performers were. We used their actual performance assessment scores to decide.

We expected that high performers would get the richest feedback, but this isn't how it plays out.

High performers get 1.5x more feedback

Before we dive into feedback quality, let's consider feedback volume. Employees who get more feedback have more opportunities to grow. High performers are the fastest growers within their organizations, and this year's data shows that they get 1.5x more feedback than their peers. (Figure 3.1)



In our work with customer data, Textio has found that individuals who write longer self-assessments receive longer written comments in their performance reviews. On average, the word count in manager comments closely correlates to the word count in employee self-assessments at every performance level. If high performers write longer self-assessments—and it makes sense that they might—then it stands to reason that they get more feedback in return.

High performers get 1.5x more feedback than their peers. On the surface, this seems to indicate that managers invest more in their high performers than in their other team members. Does this suggest that they also get feedback that is higher in quality? You might think so, but this isn't what the data shows.

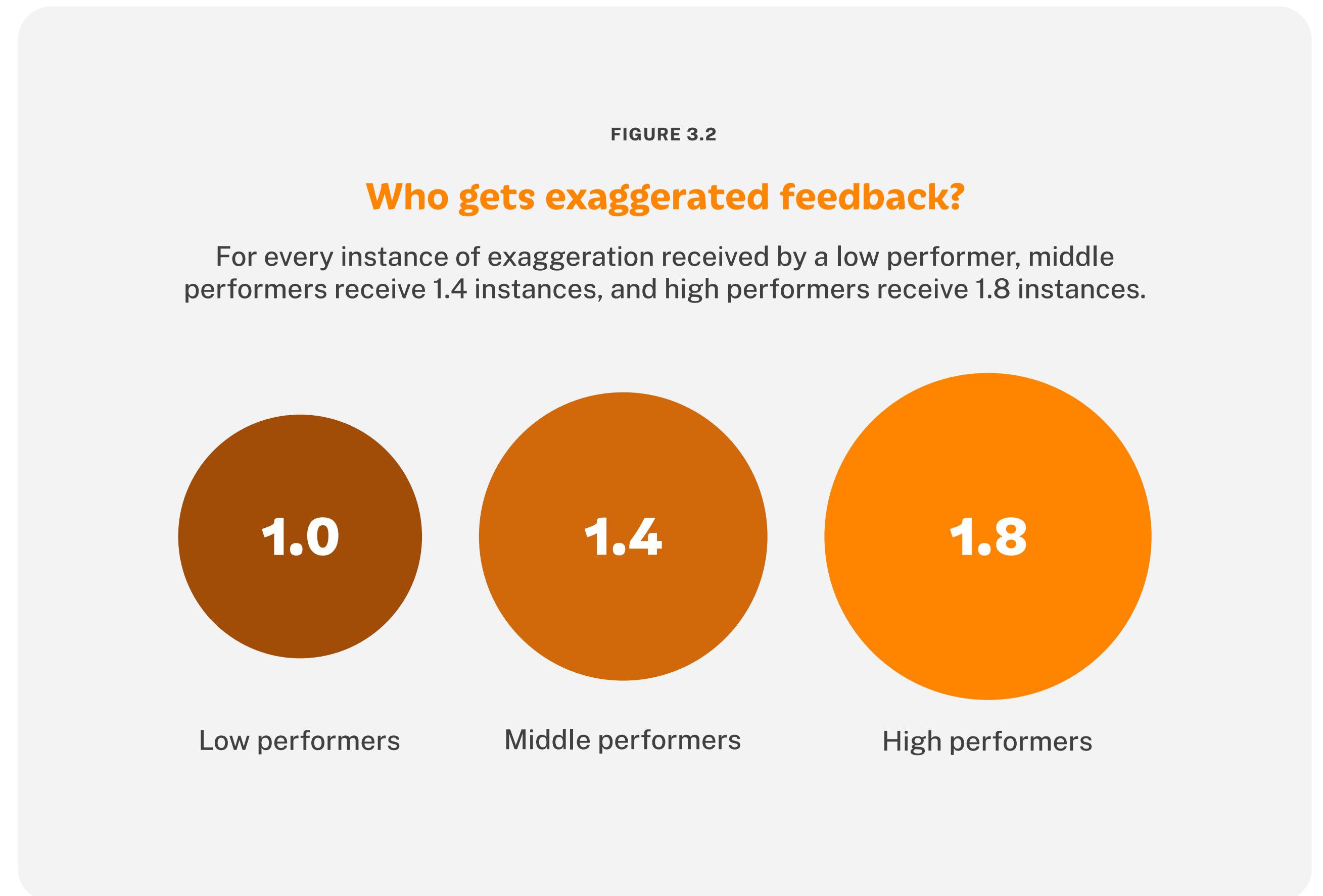
High performers get more exaggerated feedback

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.

Across this data set, the stronger an employee's performance, the more exaggerated the feedback provided by their manager. The highest performers get the most hyperbolic feedback of all. For every instance of exaggerated feedback received by a low performer, a middle performer receives 1.4. High performers receive 1.8—almost twice as much as low performers. (Figure 3.2)



Managers typically 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 that their feedback will be heard and internalized. 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](#).

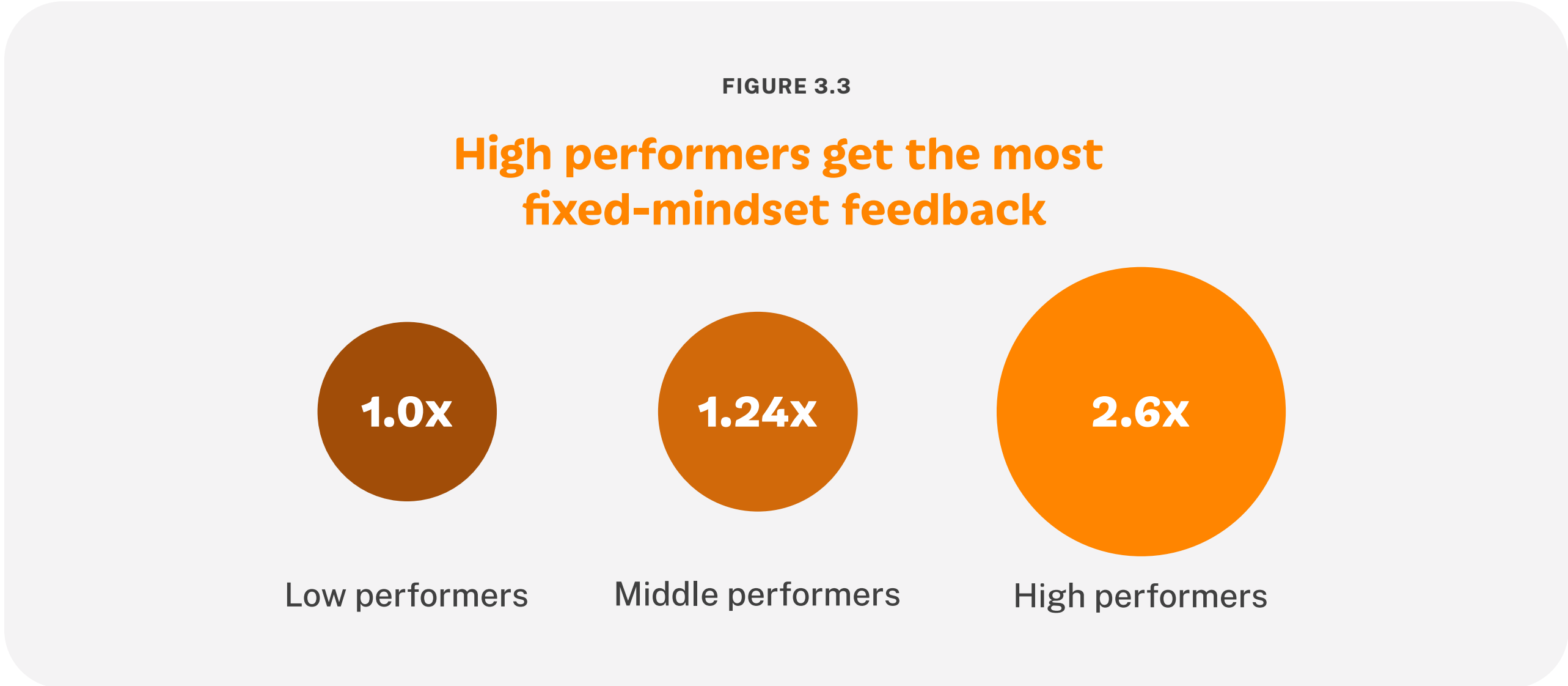
Managers aren't helping high performers by turning their feedback up to 11. Rather, managers undermine their own credibility when they provide this kind of feedback.

High performers get more 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 include comments 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. For instance, Asian and white men are more likely to be called *brilliant*, while Black women are most likely to be called *overachievers*. You can read more deeply about this in [Textio's 2022 report](#).

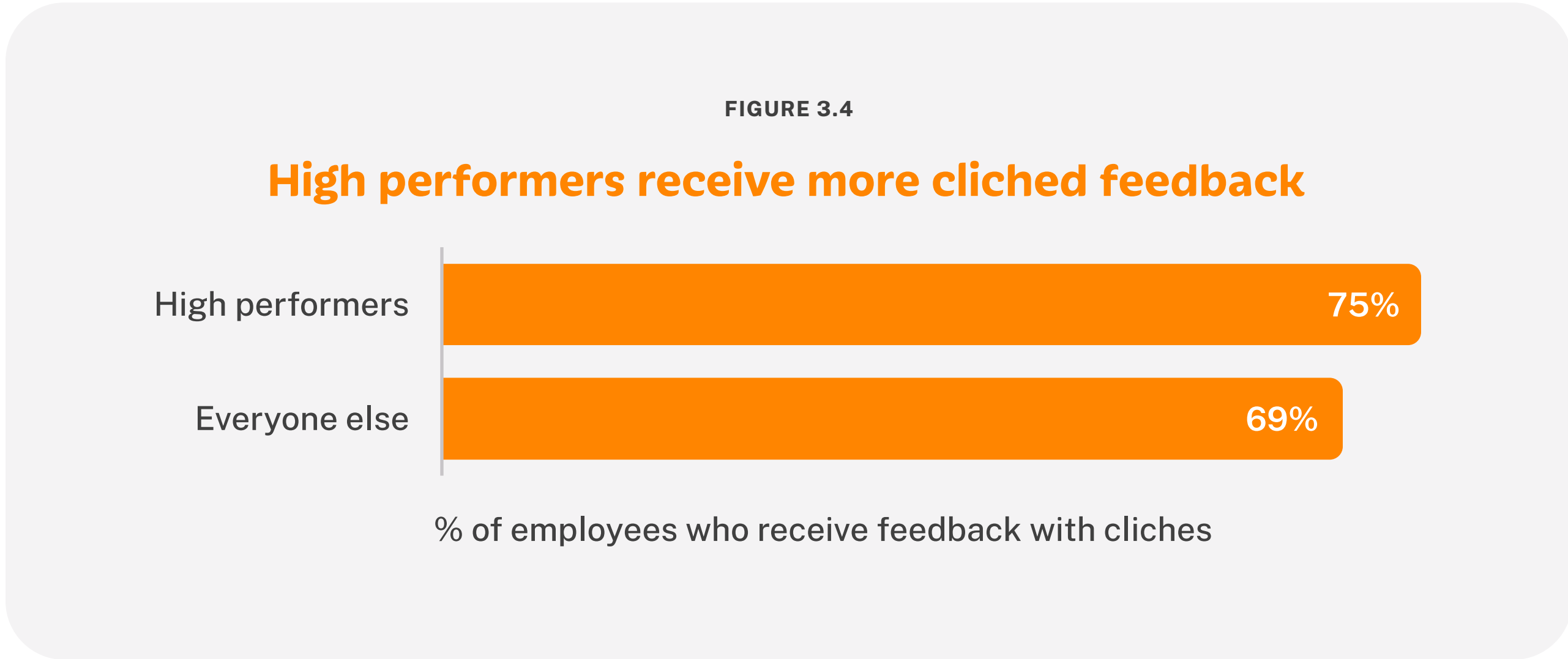


This year's data reveals that the frequency of fixed-mindset feedback increases as employee performance level increases. High performers receive fixed-mindset feedback 2.1x more often than middle performers, and an amazing 2.6x more often than low performers. (Figure 3.3)

High performers also receive more cliched feedback overall. These are cases when a manager centers a piece of business jargon in their written feedback, e.g.,

- She *left it all on the field*.
- He *thinks outside the box*.

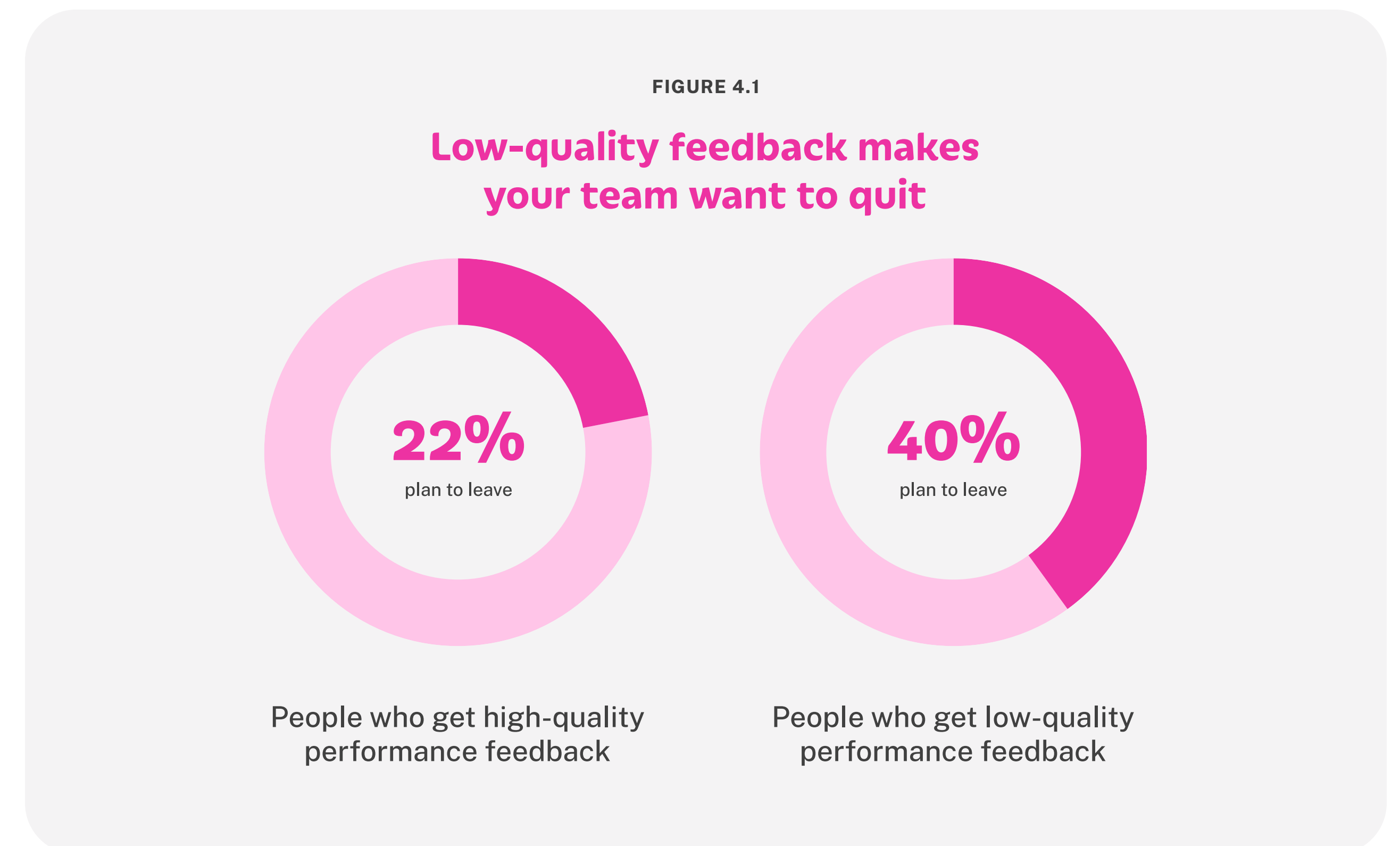
These generic phrases have been used so often in business contexts that they have lost a great deal of their meaning. Managers rely on these cliches as a fast shorthand that stands in for more detailed and specific feedback. (Figure 3.4)



In other words, high performers may receive more feedback than their peers, but the feedback they get is often the least thoughtful. Managers of high performers typically default to cliches, exaggerations, and fixed-mindset descriptions like *intelligent* and *brilliant* when providing feedback. The feedback is not especially specific or actionable, and especially in managing high performers, this has a cost.

When high performers get low-quality feedback, they quit

Textio's 2023 report showed that people who get low-quality feedback in annual performance reviews are 63% more likely to quit their jobs within a year. This is true even when the feedback is positive in nature. Employees of all performance levels expect actionable, relevant feedback that is rich with specific examples, meaningful recognition of their contributions, and opportunities for continued development.



Low-quality feedback is particularly problematic for high performers, though, simply because of how many more job options the highest performers have. Once high performers begin looking for a new job, they are more likely to find one quickly and more likely to take the risk of accepting a stretch offer.

Contrary to how many managers approach their top talent, high performers are not low maintenance. High performers expect engagement on many fronts, including having a rich, ongoing dialogue about performance and career with their manager.

Women and people of color get lower-quality feedback regardless of performance rating

The feedback gap is present for all high performers, but the impact of receiving low-quality feedback is especially critical for high performers who are women and people of color. In 2022, [Textio shared data that showed significant bias in feedback based on demographic background](#), with women, Black and Hispanic/Latino people, and people over 40 getting lower-quality feedback than their peers.

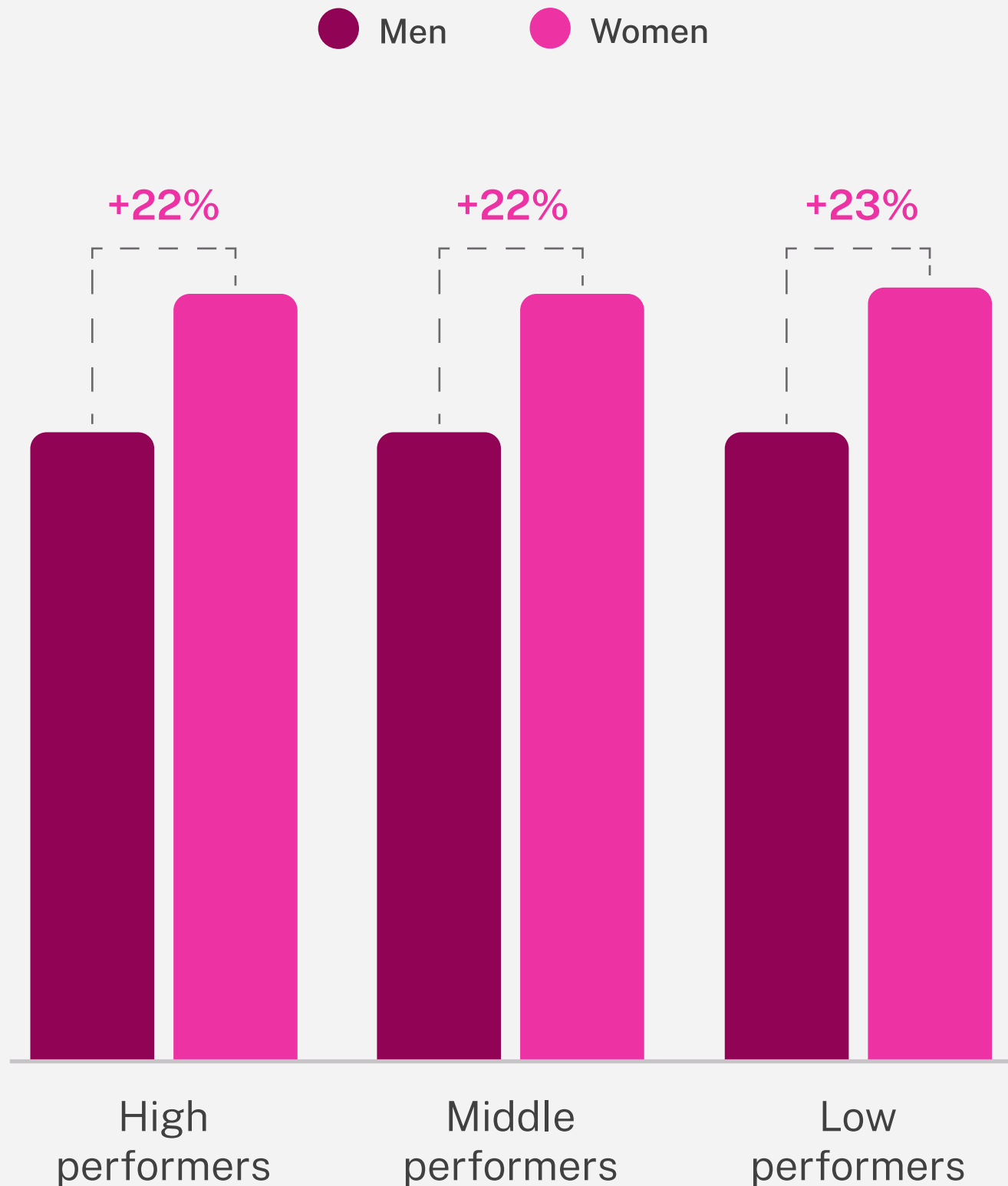
This year’s data validated those same patterns, particularly with regard to gender. Regardless of performance level, women get feedback about their personalities rather than their work 22% more often than men. Most notably, the data looks the same for high, middle, and low performers.

You’re reading that chart right: in the intersection between performance and gender, gender bias wins. Not even being the highest performer exempts women from paying the personality tax. High-performing women get exactly as much personality feedback as their lower-performing peers.

This data about written performance reviews made us curious about patterns in the feedback that individuals of different backgrounds internalize across their work experiences. For instance, if high-performing men are often told they are *brilliant*, and high-performing women are often told they are successful despite being *unlikable*, what impact does this have on their performance over time?

In other words, if we receive a mix of performance feedback, which feedback are we most likely to remember after the fact?

FIGURE 4.2
Regardless of performance level, women receive more personality feedback than men



Which feedback do we internalize?

We've looked at feedback received by high, middle, and low performers of several demographic backgrounds. Within this context, we also wanted to understand how different groups internalize feedback. This year's survey polled 450 participants on patterns in the feedback they've received.

To explore this, we solicited input from a diverse group. We wanted to make sure we had a rich mix of genders, races, ethnicities, and ages to see what patterns emerged. (Figure 5.1, page 17) We asked all participants about a range of positive and negative terms and their experience with hearing these terms in their performance feedback. The terms are all instances of personality feedback, fixed-mindset feedback, or both.

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 it wasn't communicated.

This is true. But arguably, it only serves to make any demographic patterns we might find even more striking. Regardless of what feedback is actually given, if there are

consistent demographic patterns in what people recall *hearing*, this shows bias in feedback internalization. Specifically, we wanted to see if people are more likely to internalize feedback that aligns with social stereotypes about their demographic identity.

Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson coined the term **stereotype threat**: the risk underrepresented people feel of confirming negative stereotypes about their respective racial, ethnic, gender, or cultural groups. This can create high cognitive load and reduce academic or professional focus and performance. Researchers have found that stereotype threat causes women to score lower in math assessments, Black students to perform worse in standardized tests, and more. So if one demographic is more likely to hear a particular flavor of feedback, the impact on performance and future opportunity can be substantial.

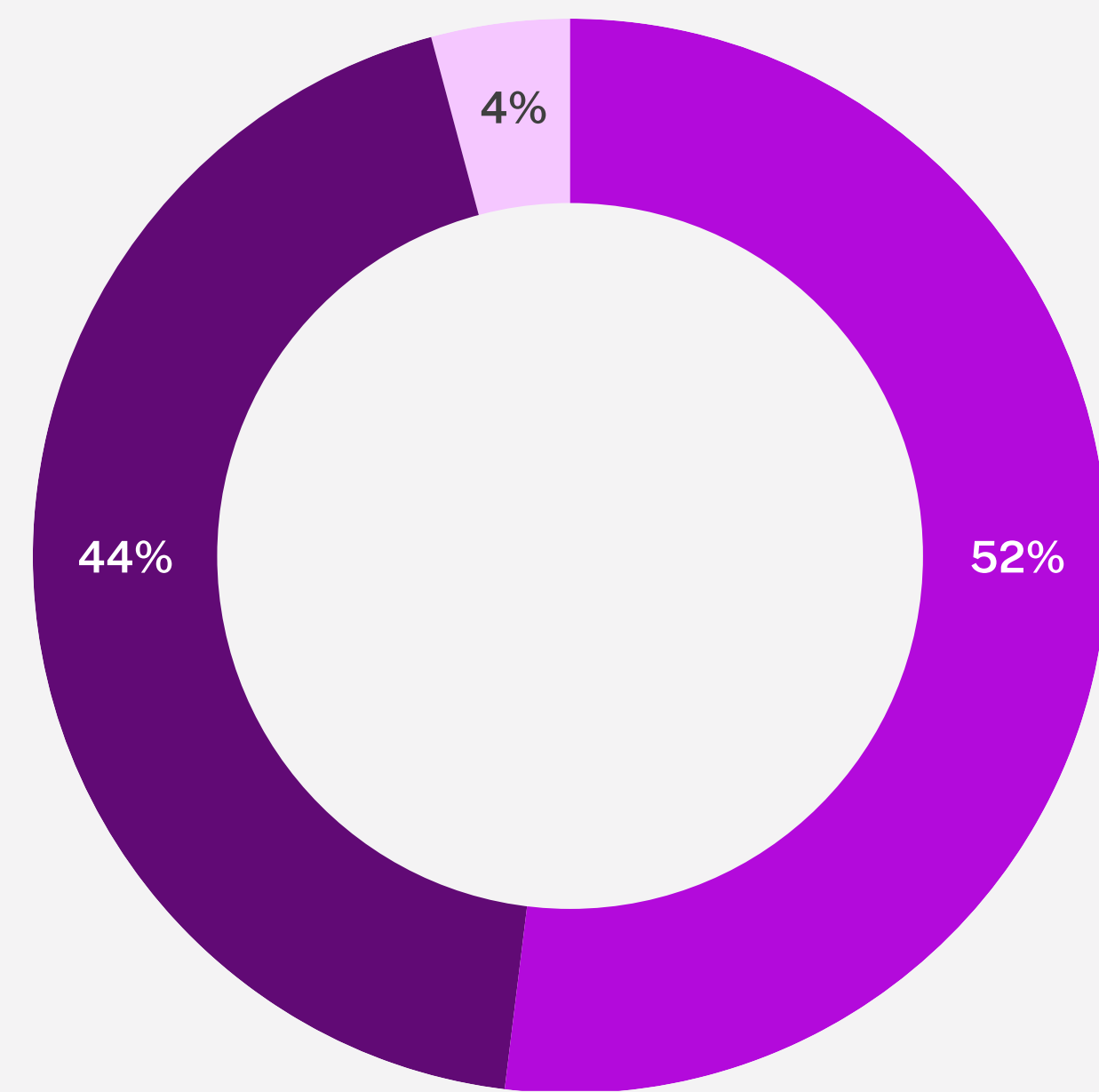
As we'll see, both gender and race have a significant impact on the feedback people internalize. This significantly increases the impact of stereotype threat on both individual and organizational performance.

FIGURE 5.1

A diverse group of survey participants

450 participants

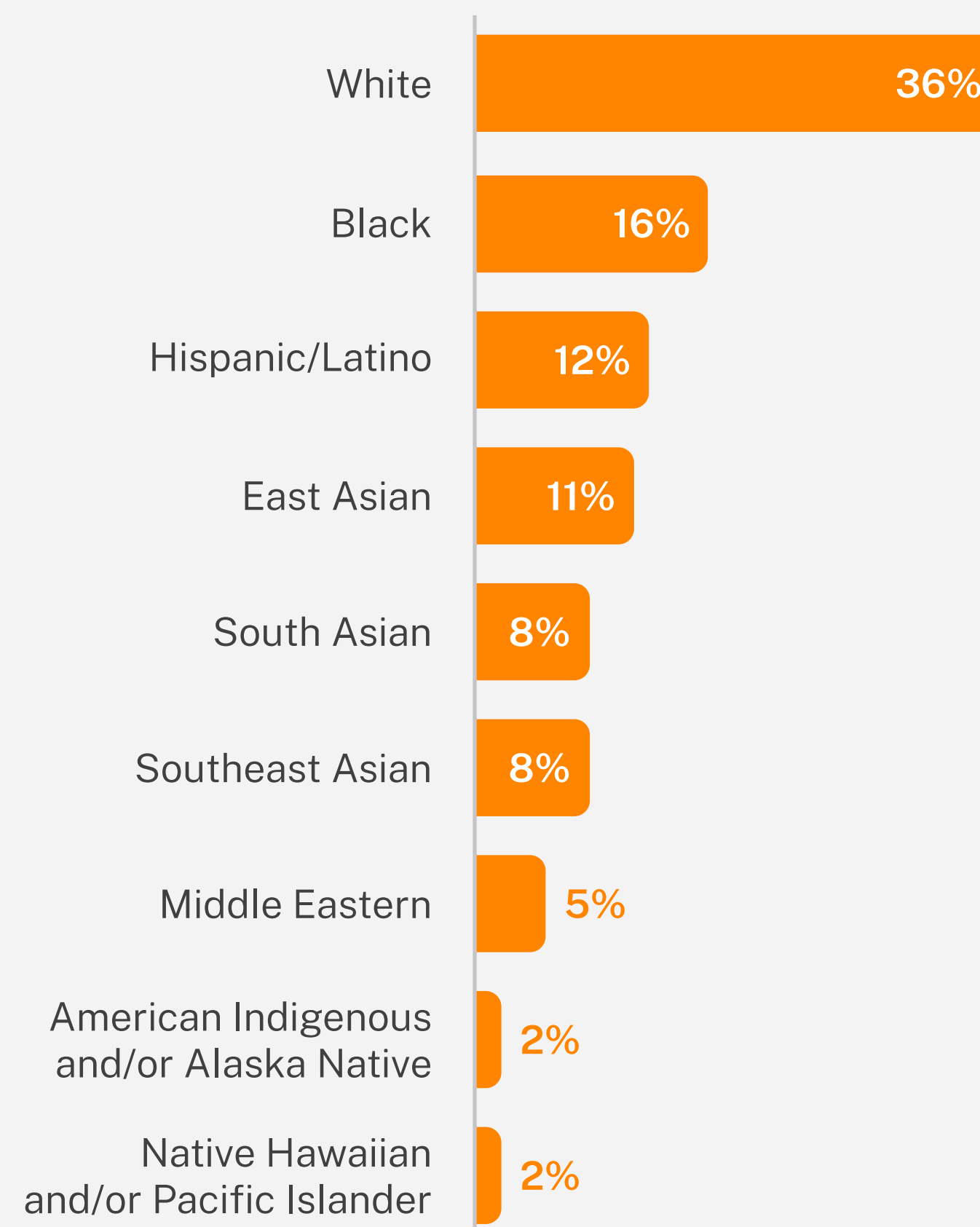
Participant gender as self-identified



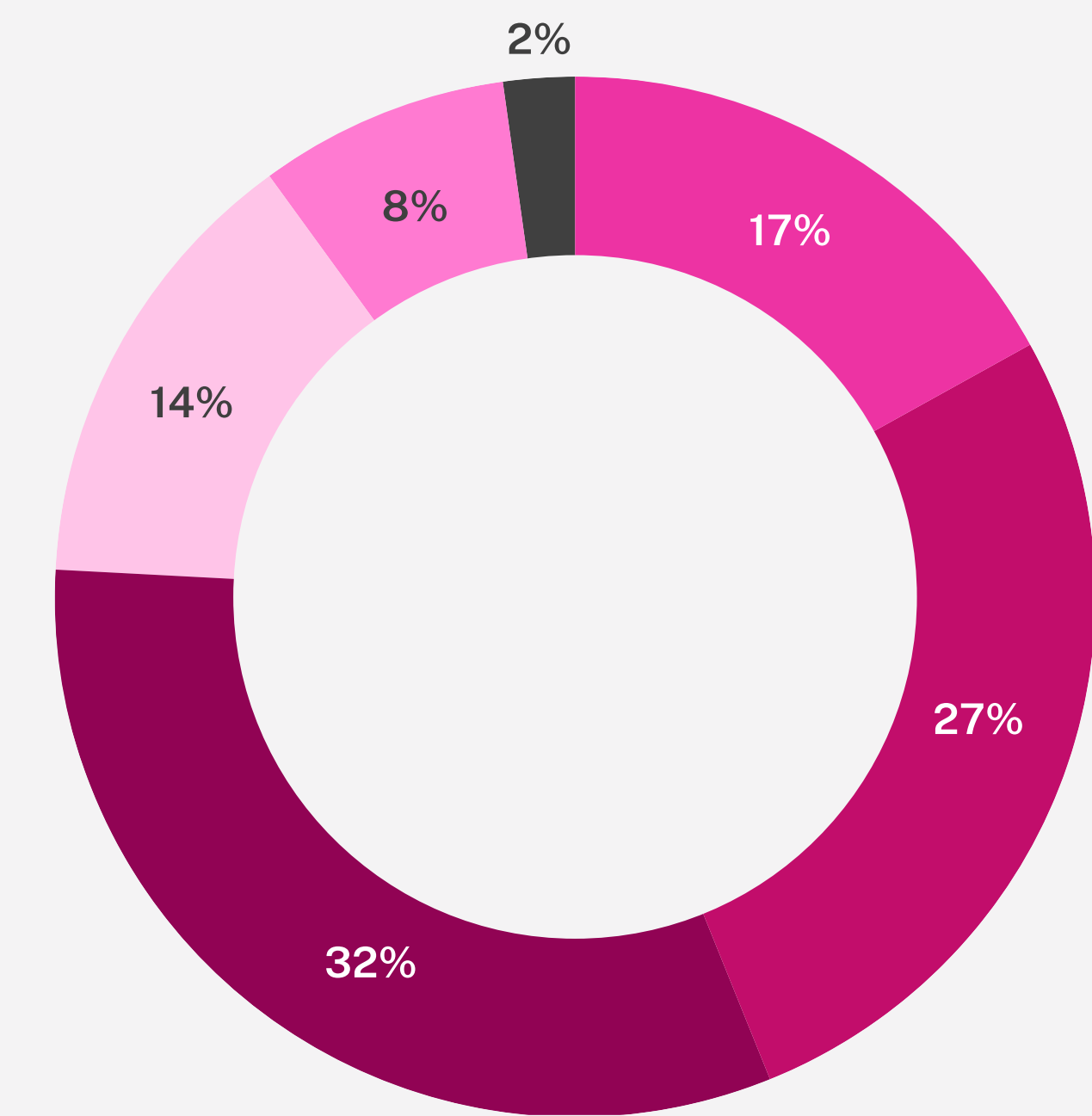
- 52% Women
- 44% Men
- 4% Non-binary or gender fluid

Participant race as self-identified

(may choose more than one)



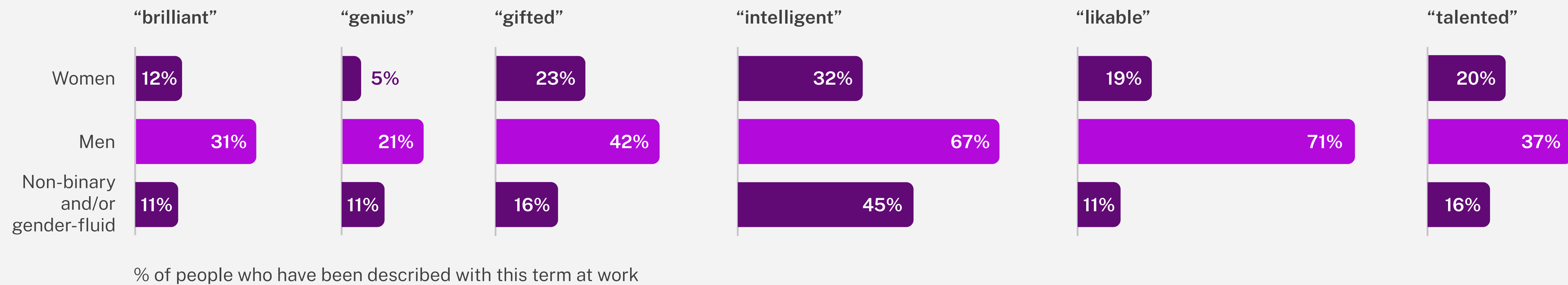
Participant age



- 17% Age 20-29
- 27% Age 30-39
- 32% Age 40-49
- 14% Age 50-59
- 8% Age 60-69
- 2% Age 70+

FIGURE 5.2

Men are 2-4x as likely to be positively stereotyped



Men are 2-4x as likely to internalize positive stereotypes about themselves

We asked participants to share how often they’ve been described with positive and negative terms in workplace feedback. Positive terms included fixed-mindset and/or personality characteristics like *brilliant*, *likable*, *talented*, and *intelligent*. For each term, respondents indicated whether they have heard themselves described this way frequently, occasionally, or rarely.

Men consistently report hearing the positive terms more than women, non-binary, and gender-fluid people. 67% of men recall being described as *intelligent*, contrasted with 45% of non-binary people and 32% of women. 71% of men recall being described as *likable*, contrasted with just 19% of women and 11% of non-binary people. (Figure 5.2)

Across the board, men have internalized the most positive descriptions of themselves up to 4x more than people of other genders. This matches what we see in the written feedback data, where men really are more likely to be described with these terms.

Women are 7x as likely to internalize negative stereotypes about themselves

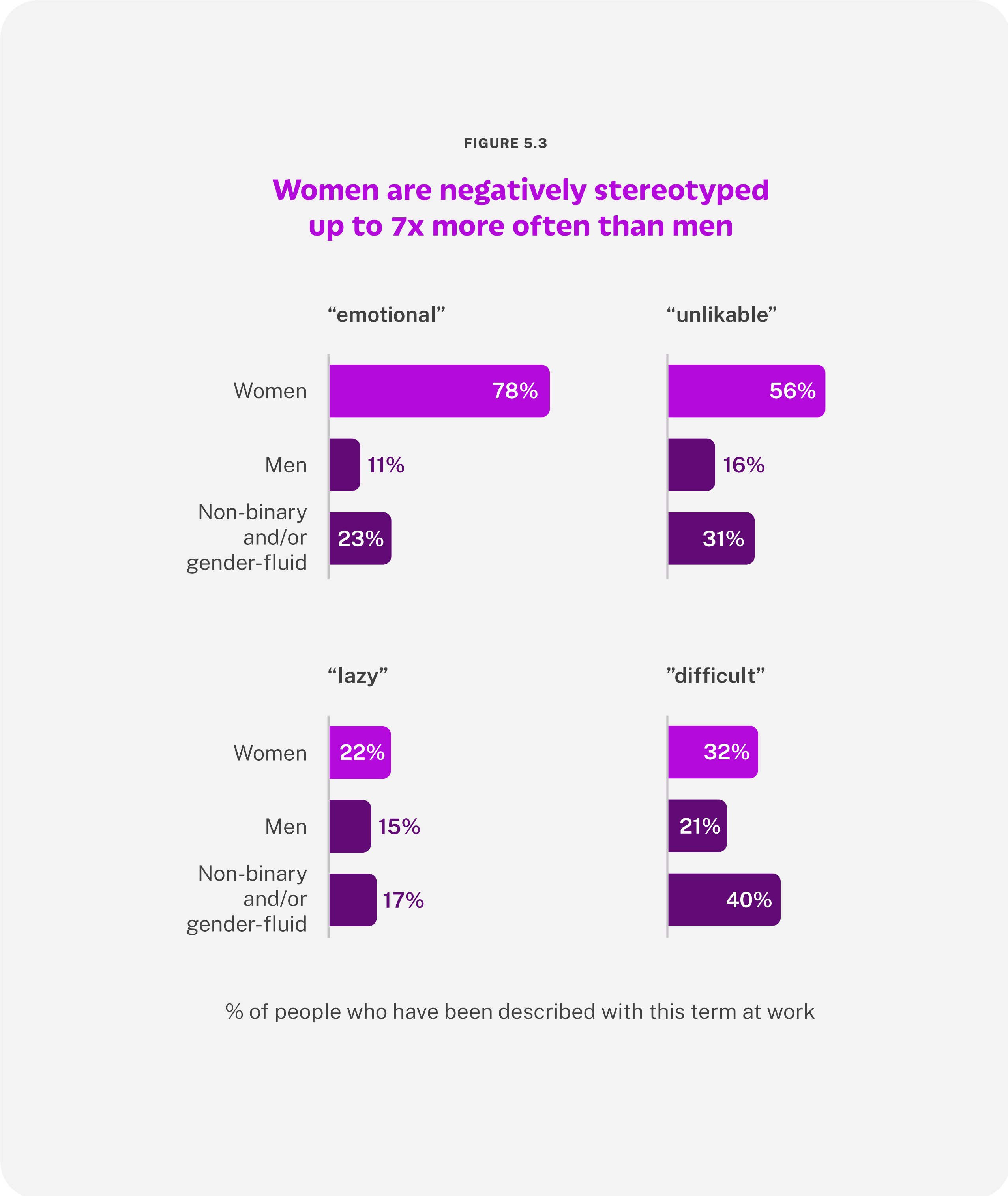
We also asked participants to share how often they've been described with several negative terms in workplace feedback. Like the positive descriptors, the terms we explored were all instances of personality feedback or fixed-mindset feedback, such as *unlikable*, *lazy*, and *difficult*. For each term, respondents indicated whether they have heard themselves described this way frequently, occasionally, or rarely. (Figure 5.3)

Non-binary people are somewhat more likely to recall being described with the negative terms than men, and women are significantly more likely to recall being described with most of these terms than people of any other gender. Only 16% of men recall being described as *unlikable*, contrasted with 31% of non-binary people and 56% of women. Only 11% of men recall being negatively described as *emotional*, contrasted with 23% of non-binary people and a staggering 78% of women.

In all, women have internalized hearing the most negative descriptions of themselves up to seven times more often than people of other genders. Just as with the gender bias we've seen in how the positive terms are used and internalized, the patterns in how people internalize these negative terms matches what we see in the written performance feedback data. Women really are more likely to be described with these negative terms.

Race and ethnicity change the stereotypes that people internalize

This research included a racially diverse set of participants. We wanted to see whether an individual's race changed the feedback patterns that they internalized. Prior research shows that race has a strong impact on the social stereotypes that people internalize about themselves, so we expected to see those patterns reflected in this data. In the end, we saw the impact of race for both positive and negative terms.

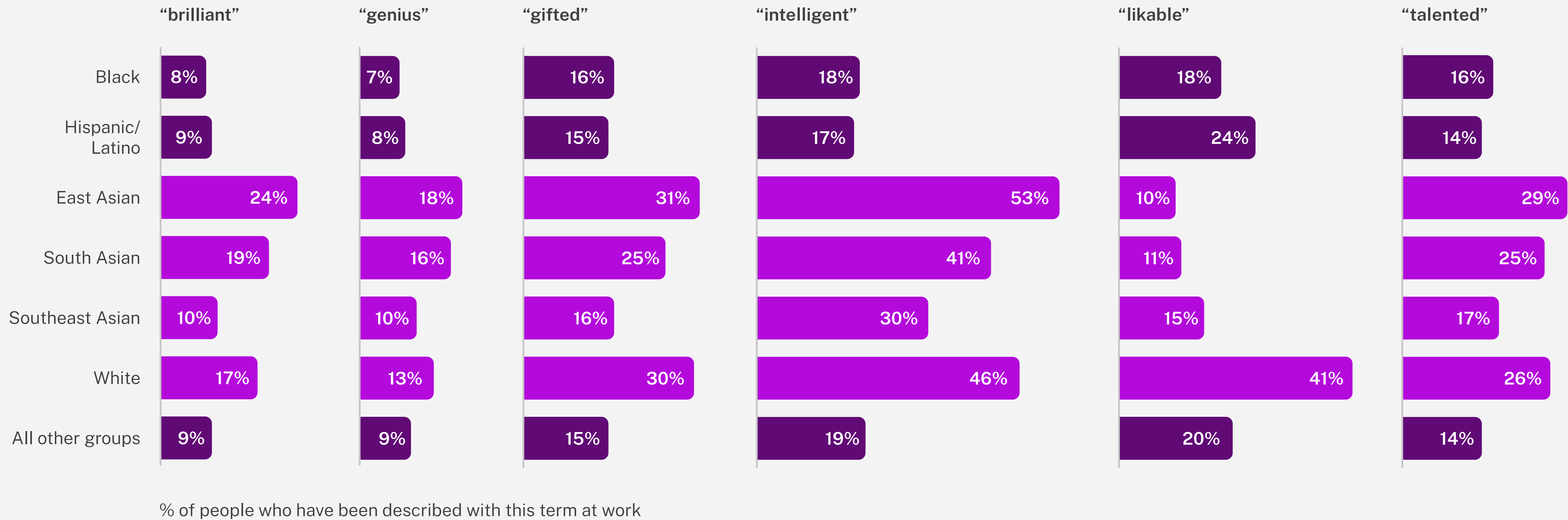


On the whole, white and Asian people are more likely to recall being described with positive terms. Sometimes the deltas are substantial. For instance, about half of the white and Asian people in this research can recall being described as *intelligent*, compared with just 17% of Hispanic/Latino people and 18% of Black people. White people are more than twice as likely to recall being called *likable* compared to almost every other group. (Figure 5.4)

We see similar patterns with the negative terms as well. 30% of South Asian people recall being called *difficult*, compared with just 9% of East Asian people. 49% of South Asian people and 42% of Black people recall being called *unlikable*, compared with just 15% of East Asian people. More than 60% of Hispanic/Latino and Black people recall being negatively described as *emotional*, compared with just 21% of white people and 11% of East Asian people. (Figure 5.5, page 22)

FIGURE 5.4

White and Asian people are 2x as likely to be positively stereotyped



Across the group, there are clear and significant demographic patterns in the feedback labels that people have internalized. In so many of these cases, the feedback that people internalize aligns with social stereotypes about their racial backgrounds.

Textio's 2022 data about real written feedback reinforces many of these findings, but the recall rates in this survey are even higher than what was measured in the written feedback. This suggests stereotype threat is at work. People only have to hear negative racial stereotypes about themselves a handful of times to internalize it deeply.

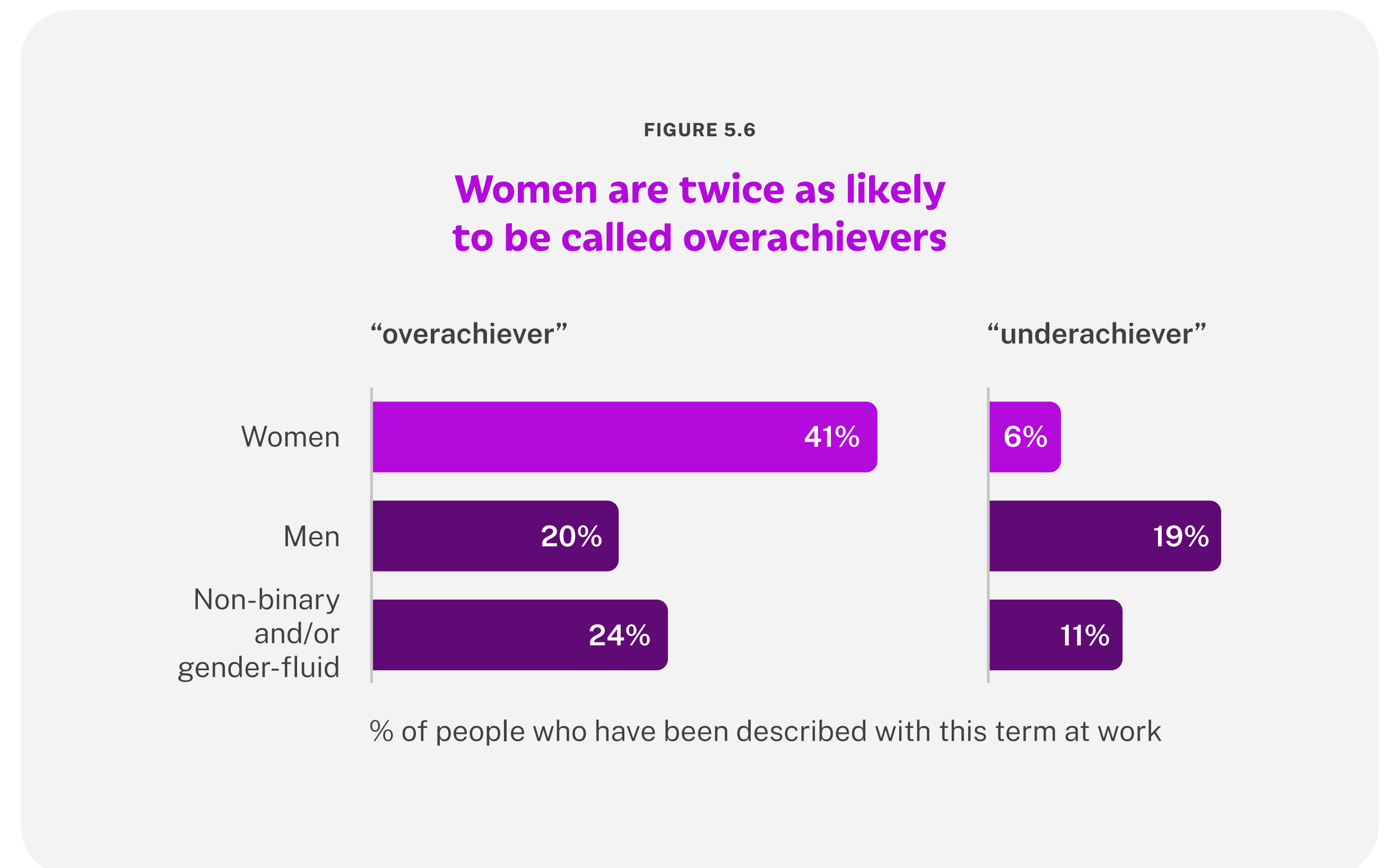
Women and Asian people are 2x as likely to internalize the “overachiever” label

Among instances of problematic feedback, *overachiever* is royalty. The label is often applied to strong performers transcending low expectations. *Overachiever* communicates an insult masquerading as a begrudging compliment. In our 2022 data, Black women were described as overachievers four times as often as white men; Asian women were described with this term more than five times as often as white men. As gaslighting remarks go, *overachiever* is top of the charts.

Underachiever has the opposite impact. This term communicates that, despite your performance, the feedback provider knows that you're capable of better. We didn't look specifically at underachiever in prior years, but the caption for this term might be “I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt, despite all the evidence to the contrary.”

Given the patterns in written feedback, it's no surprise that women recall being described as overachievers twice as often as men do. Even with this, the sheer prevalence of *overachiever* is astoundingly high. 41% of the women participating in this research can recall being described as overachievers in a professional setting. In other words, nearly half of women have internalized this not-quite-compliment. (Figure 5.6)

In contrast, men are three times as likely to recall being described as underachievers. In other words, men are much more likely to internalize being given credit for potential performance, rather than actual performance. Only 6% of women can recall being described as underachievers.



Race and ethnicity also have impact on how people internalize and recall *overachiever* and *underachiever* descriptors. Across the board, people of color are more likely to recall being described as overachievers, with more than a third of East Asian and South Asian participants identifying with this label. On the other hand, white people are between 3 and 11 times as likely to recall being described as underachievers compared with people of all other races. (Figure 5.7, page 22)

Taken as a whole, the survey data shows how people are more likely to internalize feedback that aligns with social stereotypes about their demographic identity. Given the research on stereotype threat, this contributes to a fixed-mindset mentality that makes it harder for people to escape social stereotypes. Women and people of color are much more likely than others to be tagged with negative characteristics, so these patterns have an especially destructive impact on these groups.

FIGURE 5.7

Asian people are twice as likely to be called overachievers

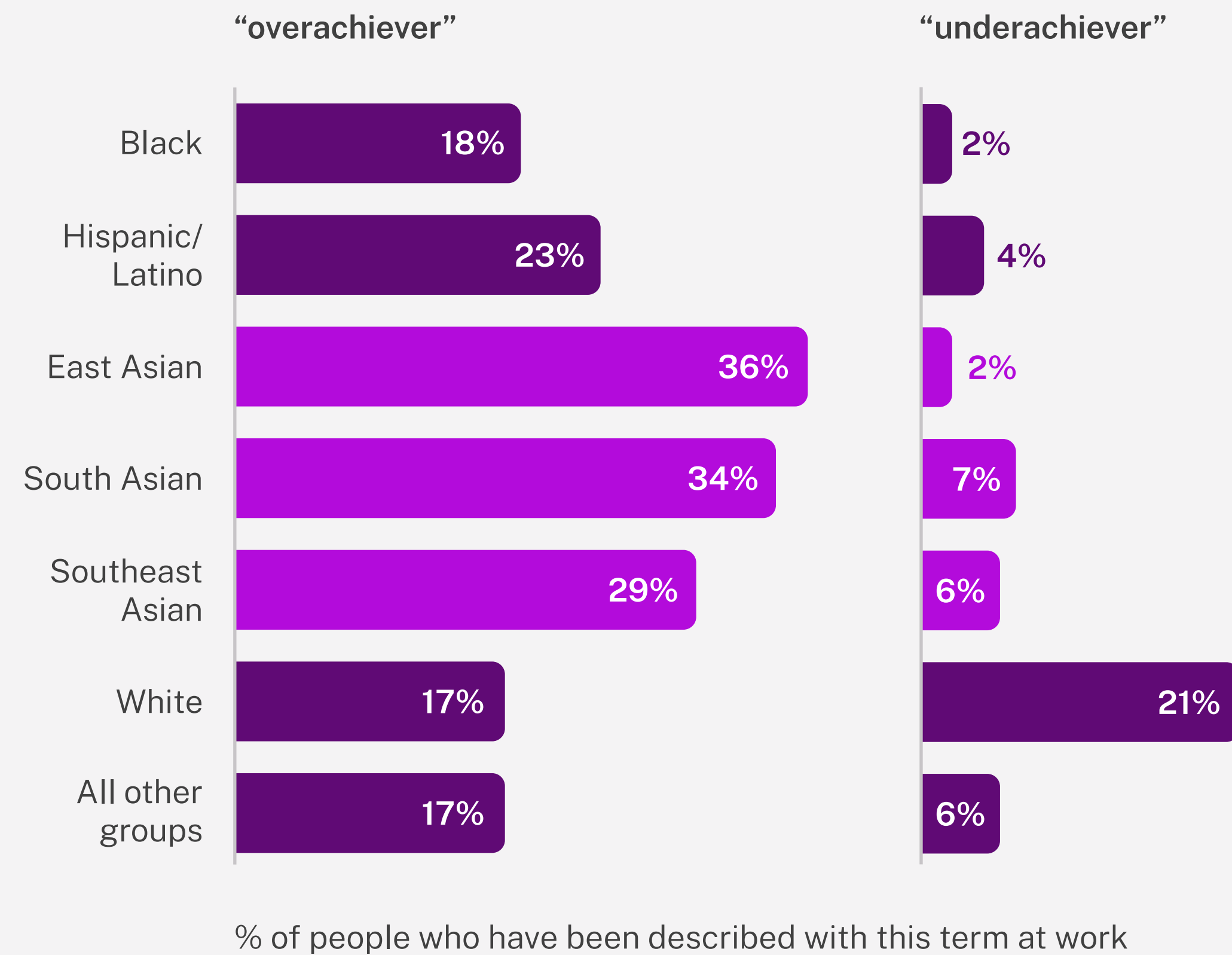
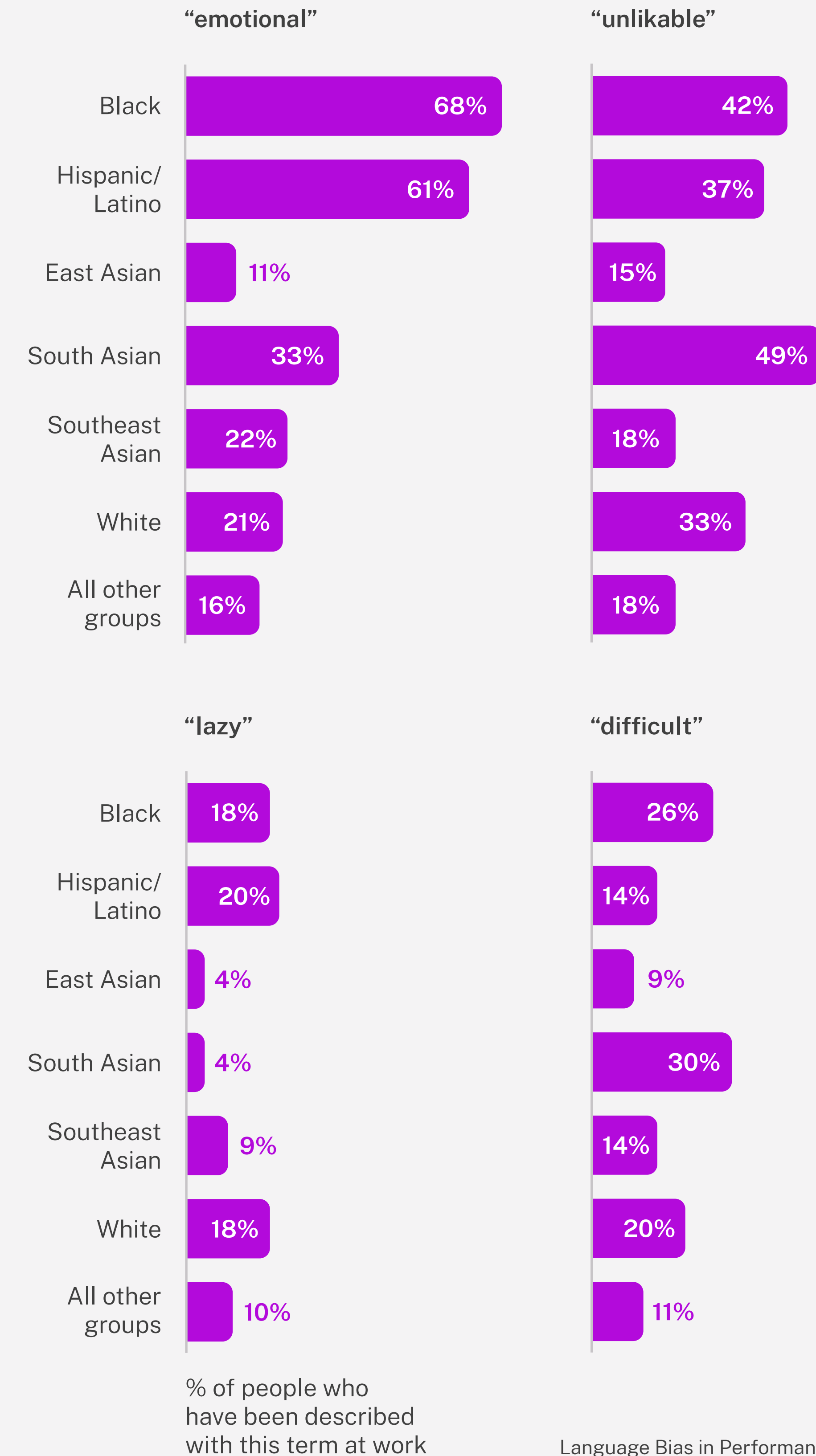


FIGURE 5.5

Critical feedback reinforces negative stereotypes



What leaders need to know

As we've seen, regardless of performance level, people are more likely to internalize feedback that aligns with social stereotypes about their identity. This creates a disproportionate disadvantage for people from the underrepresented groups that have been most heavily penalized with negative stereotypes.

The only way to safeguard against this is to provide feedback that avoids fixed-mindset and personality stereotypes, and is instead grounded in specific work behaviors and actionable examples. Feedback that is rich in stereotype rather than actionable examples creates a double whammy. It tanks both employee performance and employee retention.

What's more, even high performers aren't exempt from these patterns. High performers of all backgrounds receive more feedback than their peers, yes, but their feedback is more likely to be low in quality. As we saw in [Textio's 2023 report](#), people who get low-quality feedback are more likely to quit.

Feedback grounded in cliché and stereotype is especially problematic for high performers when they come from underrepresented backgrounds. Rather than providing the kind of constructive feedback that motivates high performers to continue to grow, clichéd feedback is particularly empty. People who receive clichéd feedback have less opportunity to grow.

In other words, you may be trying to retain your high performers, but if you're like the thousands of managers whose feedback was included in this year's report, you are likely making performance choices that send those high performers elsewhere. This is especially harmful when paired with the fact that it's often easier for a high performer to get a significant pay raise when changing organizations rather than staying put.

If you're a manager and want to retain your high performers, especially those who come from underrepresented groups, take care with the feedback you provide. Make sure it's actionable, specific, and clear. Don't resort to fixed-mindset or personality feedback. If you need help, [Textio Lift's free trial](#) gives you an easy, free way to make sure that the feedback you're providing is effective and motivating.

If you're an HR leader tasked with supporting managers through the feedback process, you've probably noticed that running trainings once or twice a year hasn't made much difference to your employee escalations. Invest in tools that help you find the managers who most need support, even when they're not asking for help. Sharing [Textio U's feedback certification course](#) with managers ahead of your performance assessment cycle is a great, free way to scale your manager coaching.

Since we started publishing industry data ten years ago, more and more leaders have collected and analyzed data about what's happening with feedback bias in their own organizations. Though we have a long way to go, this is material and important progress. You can't fix what you can't see, and you can't see what you aren't measuring.

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

