

A large, faint lightbulb icon is centered in the background of the top half of the page. It has a glowing effect with several horizontal bars radiating from its top half.

Language Bias in **PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK**

2023

Data Analysis and Survey Results



Key findings

This year's data revealed the same broad patterns of bias in feedback that we found last year: women and people of color continue to receive the lowest-quality feedback in the workplace. New from this year's research: Regardless of background, people receiving low-quality feedback are 63% more likely to leave their organizations than everyone else.

Employee retention

- 38% of people show **attrition risk** in their current roles—they are either planning to leave their current workplace and/or have already interviewed elsewhere
- People receiving low-quality feedback are 63% more likely to **leave their organizations** than everyone else
- 61% of people planning to stay with their current employer understand what's expected of them, contrasted with only 21% of people **planning to leave** their current employer

Gender and racial bias in feedback

- Men report being called **ambitious** 2x more often than women
- Women report being called **helpful** 2x more often than men
- Hispanic people report being called **passionate** 2x more often than white people
- White people report being called **easy to work with** 2x more often than Asian people

Performance feedback quality

- 17% of respondents specifically name **insufficient feedback** as a primary reason they're looking for other roles
- 83% of **men say they understand what's required** to earn their next promotion—in contrast to 71% of women, non-binary, transgender, and gender non-conforming people
- Only 54% of Asian people say that they understand **how to earn their next promotion**
- People who get performance reviews containing **"I think" hedging statements** are 29% more likely to leave their company within a year than everyone else
- Black employees get 26% more **unactionable feedback** than non-Black employees, despite only receiving 79% as much feedback overall
- Non-binary, transgender, and gender non-conforming people report receiving **insufficient feedback** 1.5x more often than men
- Women report **feeling disrespected or underappreciated** 1.3x more often than men

Foreword

When we launched Textio's inaugural research report on bias in performance feedback last year, I reflected on how much had happened in the decade since I'd first published on this topic. I shared that, though it's hard to imagine today, ten years ago, few people were looking at language bias in the workplace. Today, everyone is talking about Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and inclusive language. A decade ago, it was barely on the map.

Since we published last year's report, the pace of the conversation has only accelerated. If you track the news, DEI in the workplace has become a polarizing topic. Over the past year, media coverage of DEI has increased 383%. There's a lot happening right now and it's hard to make sense of it all.

In June, the Supreme Court rolled back affirmative action in higher education. State-level legislation in Texas and Florida followed, banning DEI programs at public universities. Since then, several stories have emerged suggesting that overall corporate investment in DEI and workplace fairness is dropping due to mounting legal and cultural pressures. Except the data tells us this isn't true.

The number of available DEI roles has fallen over the last year, but significantly less—like 20 points less—than the number of roles in marketing, data science, and engineering. The use of terms like diversity, equity, and inclusion in public job posts is actually on the rise: after increases in usage over the last year, today over 30% of public job posts include diversity language.

The data shows that most organizations continue to invest in DEI and fair practices in hiring and management. Still, the landscape has changed. With hiring down across the board, more and more teams are moving their DEI efforts beyond recruiting and doubling down on employee retention. It's one thing to hire a diverse team. In this market, you also have to retain them.

For this year's performance feedback report, we wanted to tackle this head on. We set out to investigate the connection between feedback quality and employee retention. In particular, we wanted to understand whether investing in better manager feedback skills and systems could increase employee retention, particularly among underrepresented groups. Last year's report showed that women and people of color consistently receive the lowest-quality performance feedback. These are also the groups that are leaving their organizations at the highest rates. We set out to find out if there was a connection.

Let's dive in.



Kieran Snyder
CEO and Co-Founder, Textio

The impact of performance feedback, and closing the feedback gap

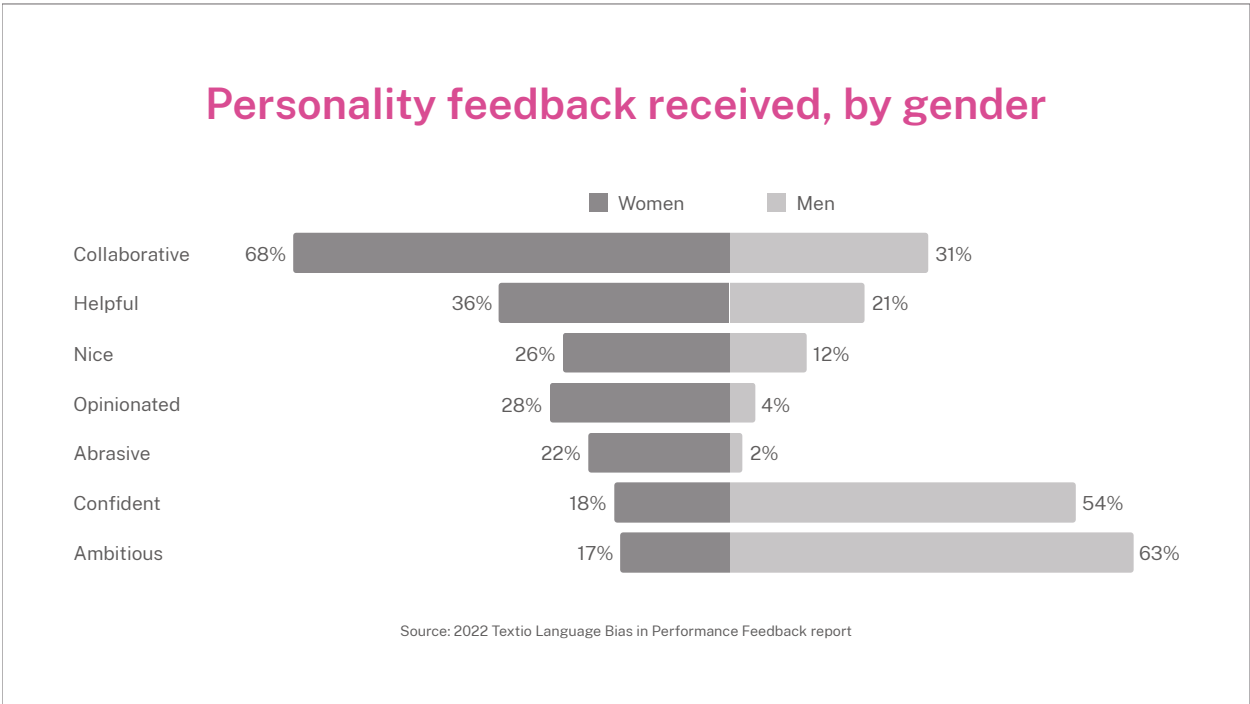
Last year, we saw some demographic groups get consistently higher-quality feedback than others. Does it matter?

In 2022, [Textio published an analysis](#) of the workplace performance feedback received by more than 25,000 people at 253 different organizations—the most comprehensive report of its kind ever published. The findings were striking: women, Black and Hispanic people, and people over 40 systematically receive significantly lower-quality feedback at work than their coworkers. This year, we set out to understand the consequences of these patterns.

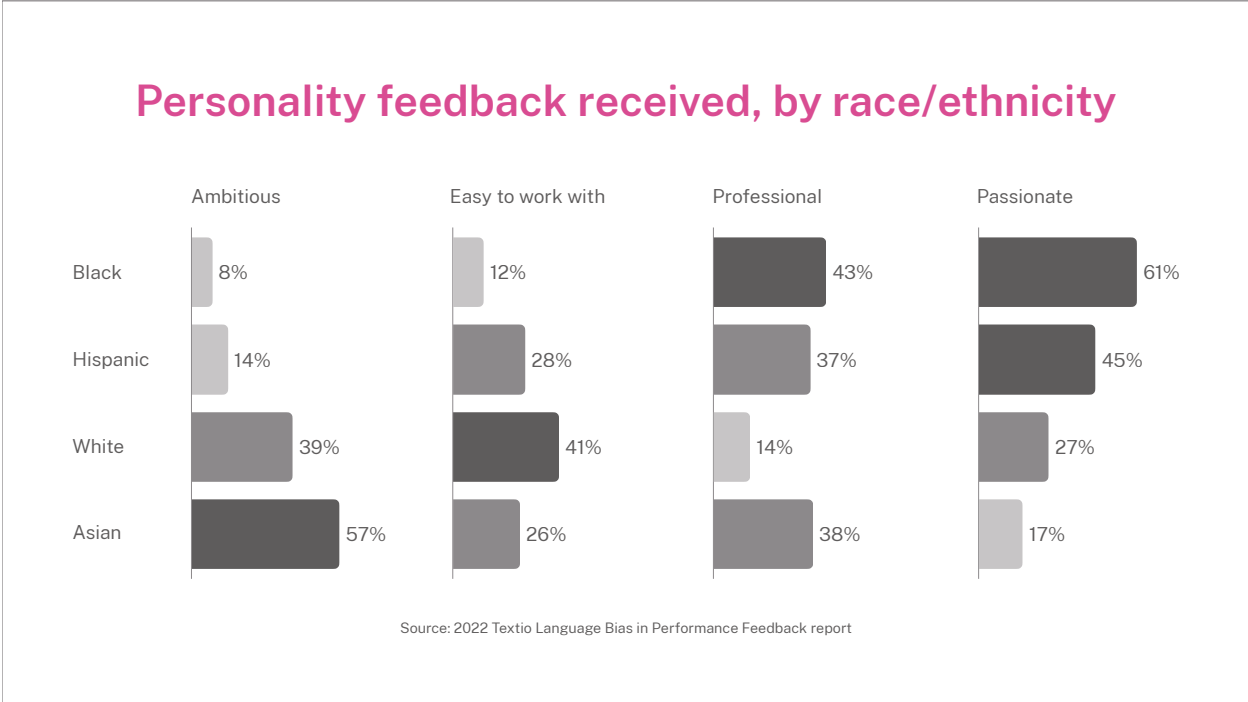
Before we dive into this year’s data, let’s take a quick look at a few of last year’s key insights so we know how much is at stake.

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**.



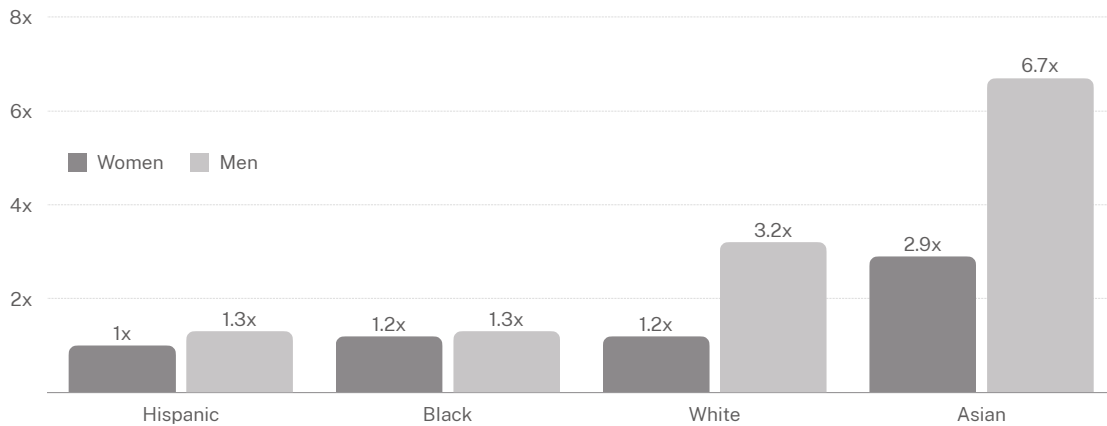
Personality feedback is stereotyped among racial groups too. For instance, Black people are most likely to be called **passionate** and least likely to be called **ambitious**, while for Asian people it is just the opposite. The personality feedback received by different racial groups is strikingly different,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



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.

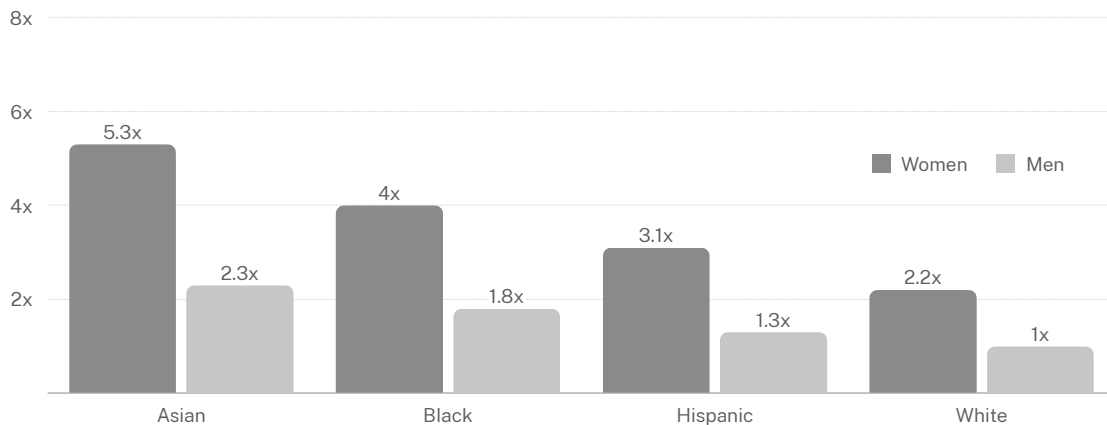
Frequency of “brilliant” and “genius” in feedback



Source: 2022 Textio Language Bias in Performance Feedback report

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.

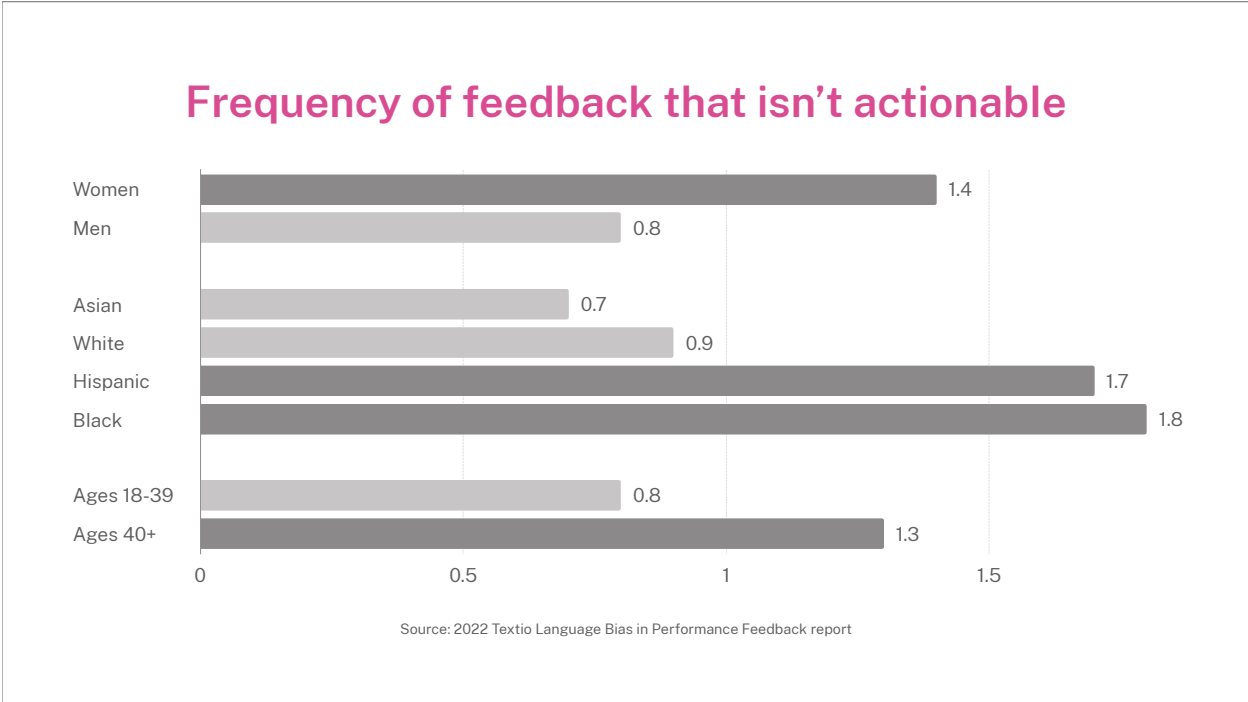
Frequency of “overachiever” in performance feedback



Source: 2022 Textio Language Bias in Performance Feedback report

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.

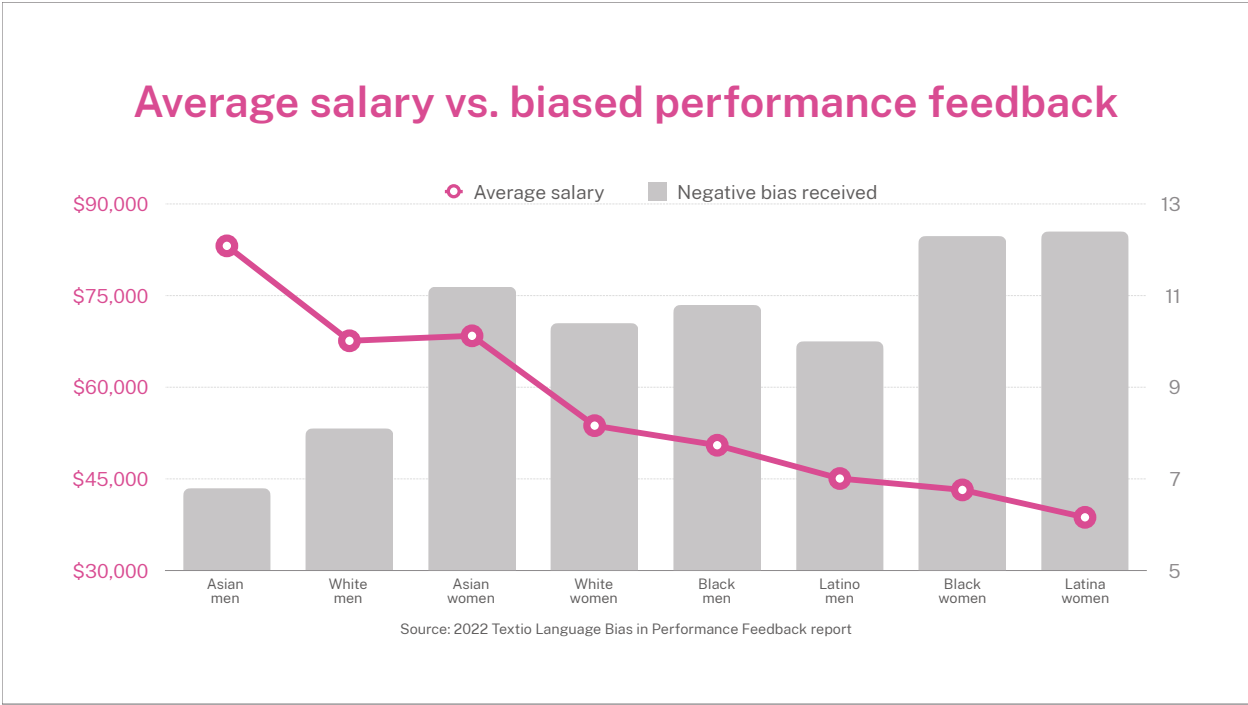


This is particularly problematic because people who receive actionable feedback have significantly more opportunity to learn and improve, which over time creates greater pay and promotion opportunities. When some groups get more actionable feedback than others, it sets up a foundational inequity that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

These patterns are everywhere

The patterns we saw in last year’s report aren’t just happening inside isolated, struggling workplaces. They are ubiquitous, showing up across all 25,000 participants in last year’s study, representing 253 different organizations. The effects were more pronounced in some places than others, but the same directional trends show up everywhere.

In last year’s report, we also noted that the groups receiving the most biased performance feedback are also the ones that are consistently on the wrong side of the pay gap. This is not a surprise: 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, and it does.



More and more organizations are doing annual pay equity audits, which is great.

But, by the time you’re observing systematic pay inequities, it’s too late. The reason pay inequities show up in the first place is that the performance management systems that drive compensation are seriously biased.

Feedback makes a big difference

This is a stark reminder not just that feedback matters, but that it matters a lot. Academic and practitioner research has long demonstrated the relationship between workplace feedback and employee engagement. For instance, in a [landmark study of 22,000 leaders by Zenger Folkman](#), leaders who scored in the top 10% on giving feedback had employees who were three times more engaged than employees with leaders scoring in the bottom 10%. Unsurprisingly, the study also revealed that the bottom 10% of leaders had employees who were three times more likely to think about quitting.

Over the last several years, most global organizations have invested in hiring more diverse teams. As more and more data rolls in on how [organizations with greater diversity in race, ethnicity, gender, age, and other traits perform better](#), this has become a business imperative.

But recruiting doesn't matter if your best hires quit. You may hire a diverse team, but if you can't retain them, you never make meaningful progress. Not only do you miss opportunities for your business to grow, but the revolving door is demoralizing for the people left behind.

In this year's performance feedback study, we set out to investigate the connection between feedback quality and employee retention. In particular, we wanted to understand whether investing in better manager feedback skills and systems could increase employee retention, particularly among the underrepresented groups that are leaving their organizations at the highest rates.

As we'll see, there is a strong relationship between feedback quality, employee retention, and bias:

- People who get the **least actionable feedback** are more likely to leave their organizations
- People who get the **least direct feedback** are more likely to leave their organizations
- The people who get the **least actionable and direct feedback** are women of all races, and Black and Hispanic people of all gender identities

This has significant consequences for DEI. The people who consistently receive the least actionable and direct feedback at work are the groups that are the most underrepresented to start with. If you want to retain and grow people from underrepresented groups in your organization, you need to start by closing the feedback gap.

Let's look at the data. Then, we'll close by showing talent leaders what to do about it.

Experiencing feedback

What do people report about the feedback they receive and the impact it has on their feelings about work?

Everyone has heard the old adage that people don't leave jobs, they leave managers. A few years ago, the [Wall Street Journal published insights about tech company Kronos's workforce](#), bringing data to the adage. After asking 5,300 employees to rate their managers on dozens of dimensions, the results were clear: managers' scores were a strong indicator of how likely their direct reports were to leave or remain at the company. People with managers in the bottom quartile of the organization were almost 25% more likely to leave than people with managers in the top quartile.

Most interestingly, as low-scoring managers improved through discussions with their teams and individual coaching, so did their team's desire to stay at the company. This is striking for several reasons. First, it means that, with the right tools and support, management skills can improve. Second, it means that most employees welcome their manager's improvement; even people who are planning to leave can change their minds if they see positive progress.

Across industries and roles, managers lead and support their teams in several ways. They set vision, assign work, and advocate on their team's behalf. They decide when someone is ready for a promotion, and they often have a say in compensation. They also provide feedback and coaching. As a matter of fact, failure to provide feedback effectively is one of the top critiques employees had of struggling managers in the Kronos study.

The Kronos team is not alone: most people in most organizations want more feedback. In a [Forbes summary published last year](#), 62% of people wished they received more feedback than they get, and 83% said they appreciated getting feedback whether it's positive or critical in nature. Nearly all (96%) said that receiving ongoing feedback is a good thing, and 4 out of 10 become actively disengaged when they get little or no feedback from their manager.

The voice of the employee: a survey

Given the broad and deep research on the relationship between feedback, management skill, and employee engagement, we started with a survey to examine this more deeply. In particular, we wanted to see if we could find a direct relationship between feedback quality and employee retention. In other words, when people receive low-quality feedback, are they more likely to quit? Conversely, if they receive high-quality feedback, are they more likely to stick around?

For this analysis, we're using the common talent management metric of employee retention. Employee retention measures the percentage of employees who have stayed with their organization over a set period of time (usually assessed at a yearly cadence). Most healthy businesses strive for high employee retention for all the reasons you might imagine: employees with tenure have the context required to do great work, it costs more to hire someone new than it does to invest in someone you already have, the strong team cohesion that comes with high employee retention is itself a goal, and more.

As such, many HR leaders rely on employee retention as a top performance metric. Increasingly, several organizations also break employee retention down by demographic groups, comparing the retention rates of different gender identities, races, age groups, and more.

In our survey, we wanted to understand:

- Are people receiving quality feedback at work? Are some demographic groups receiving higher-quality feedback than others?
- Do people plan to stay in their current organizations? Are some demographic groups more likely to leave than others?
- When people receive low-quality feedback, are they more likely to quit? If they receive high-quality feedback, are they more likely to stick around?
- Overall, does feedback quality predict employee retention rates?

We asked 500 survey participants a variety of questions about their current workplace, their desire to find a new role, and the patterns of feedback they've received at work. We also asked participants to provide basic demographic information so we could determine whether the overall patterns varied by group. As we'll see, feedback quality is a strong predictor of employee retention.

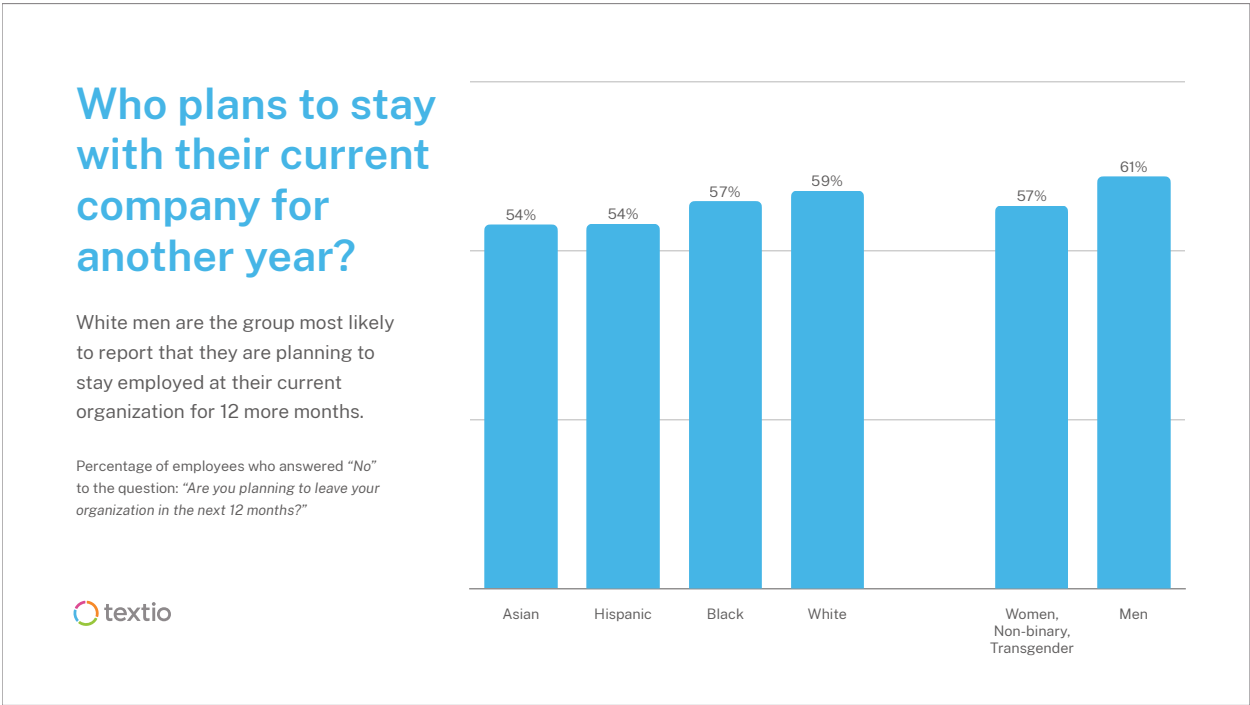
Insights: Who is planning to leave?

Feedback patterns aside, first we wanted to understand the baseline expectation for employee retention. Benchmarks for employee retention can move around based on overall market health and the number of job opportunities available, and the market has fluctuated significantly in the last couple of years. We assessed the benchmark for our survey participants by asking them two different questions:

- Do you expect to leave your organization in the next 12 months?
- Have you interviewed for a role outside of your current organization in the past 12 months?

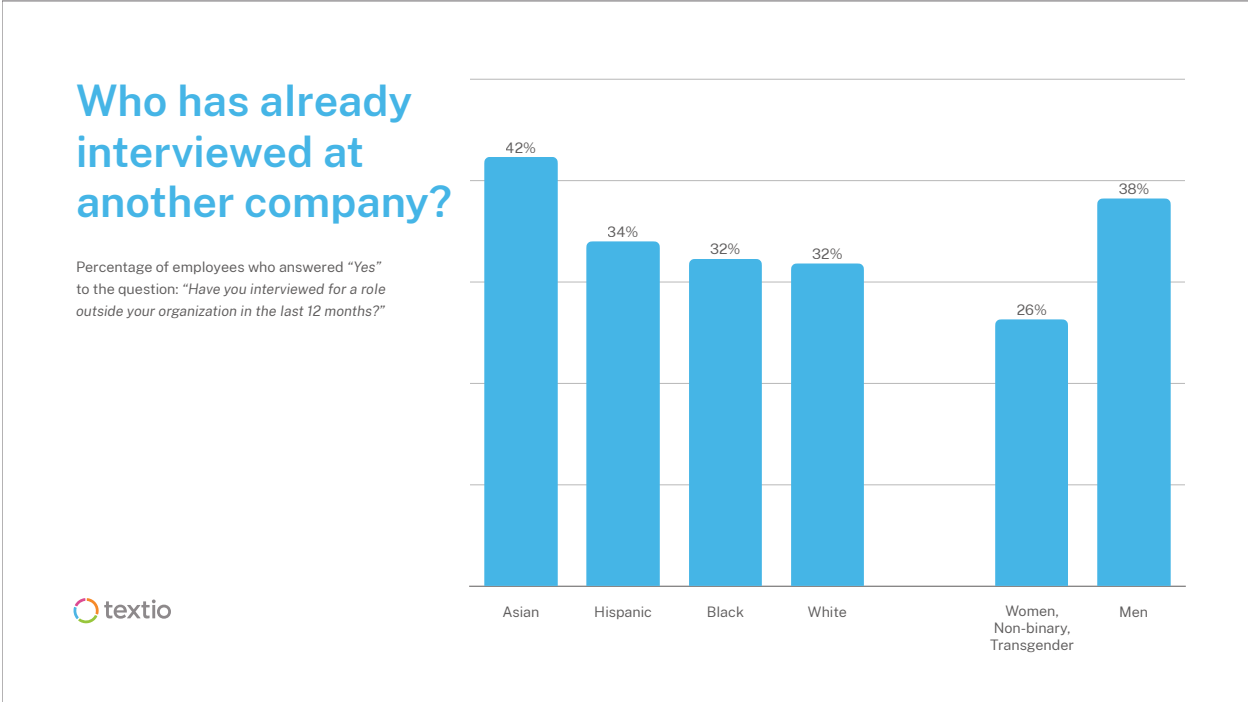
Our assumption is that answering yes to either of these questions shows some willingness to leave. Across the survey, 38% of participants answered yes to at least one of these two questions.

However, not all demographic groups say yes to these questions with the same frequency. Take a look at who plans to stay with their current organization for the year to come:



As you can see, white workers are more likely to say they plan to stay put than other groups. Among men, 61% say they plan to stick around, compared with 57% of women and people of other gender identities.

But when we look at who has already interviewed for a new role—regardless of their stated intent to stay or leave—we see a different pattern. Men, along with Asian workers of all gender identities, are significantly more likely to have actually interviewed for other roles than anyone else.



What’s with the disconnect? We asked both questions because they each give a different lens into attrition risk. Even if someone is not looking for a new role, they may still take one if the right opportunity comes along. We’ve all known people who were reportedly happy with their job but took a new role for the right salary, growth opportunity, or team culture. Our thought in asking about people’s prior interview behavior is that it might reveal attrition risk that people might not otherwise self-report.

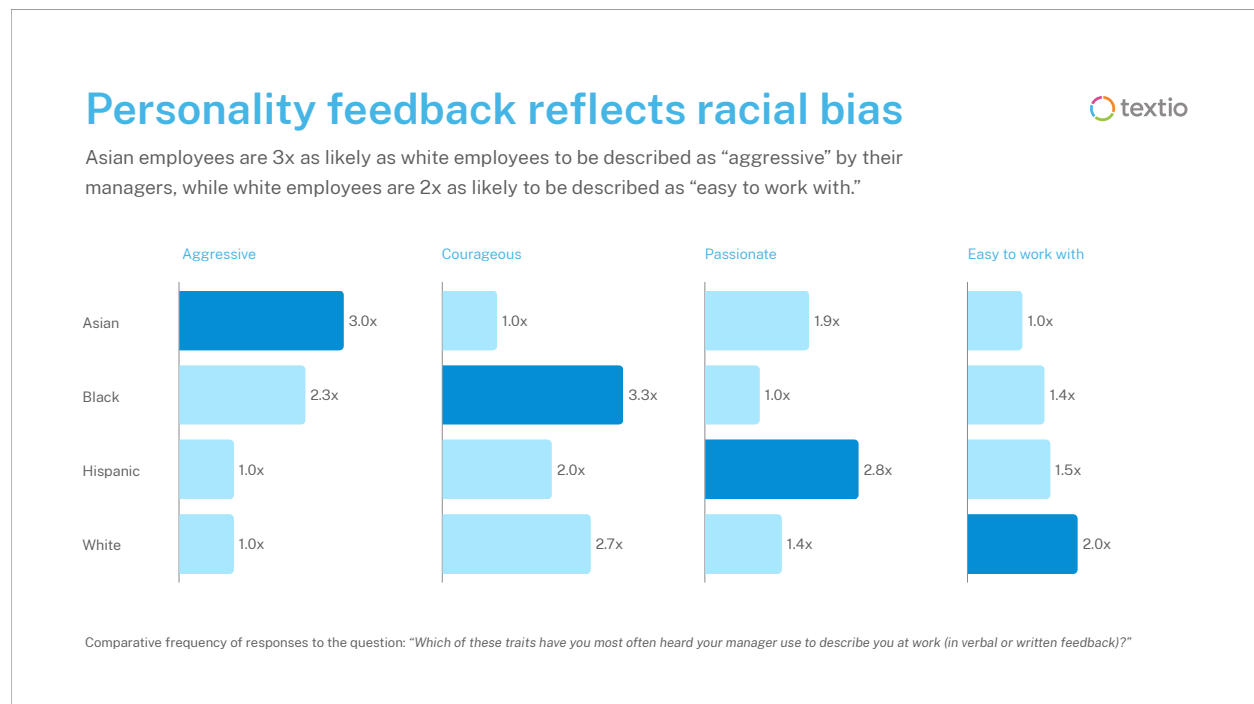
In this case, men self-report the highest intent to stay, yet they show the greatest intent to leave as measured by their actual interview behavior. It may be that men are more likely to take the recruiter’s call when the right opportunity comes along, even if they weren’t otherwise searching for a new role. Social bias may also mean that men are more likely to get called about new roles in the first place.

Across the board, 38% of participants show attrition risk in their current roles. Next, we wanted to see what kinds of feedback they are receiving. Then we can see if these patterns are tied together.

Insights: Who gets high-quality feedback?

Our 2022 report showed clear and definitive patterns: women, Black and Hispanic workers, and people over 40 receive more biased feedback than everyone else. Though it wasn't the main purpose of this year's report, we expected to replicate those findings in this year's survey, and we did. While we didn't look closely at age bias this year, the 2022 findings for race and gender held.

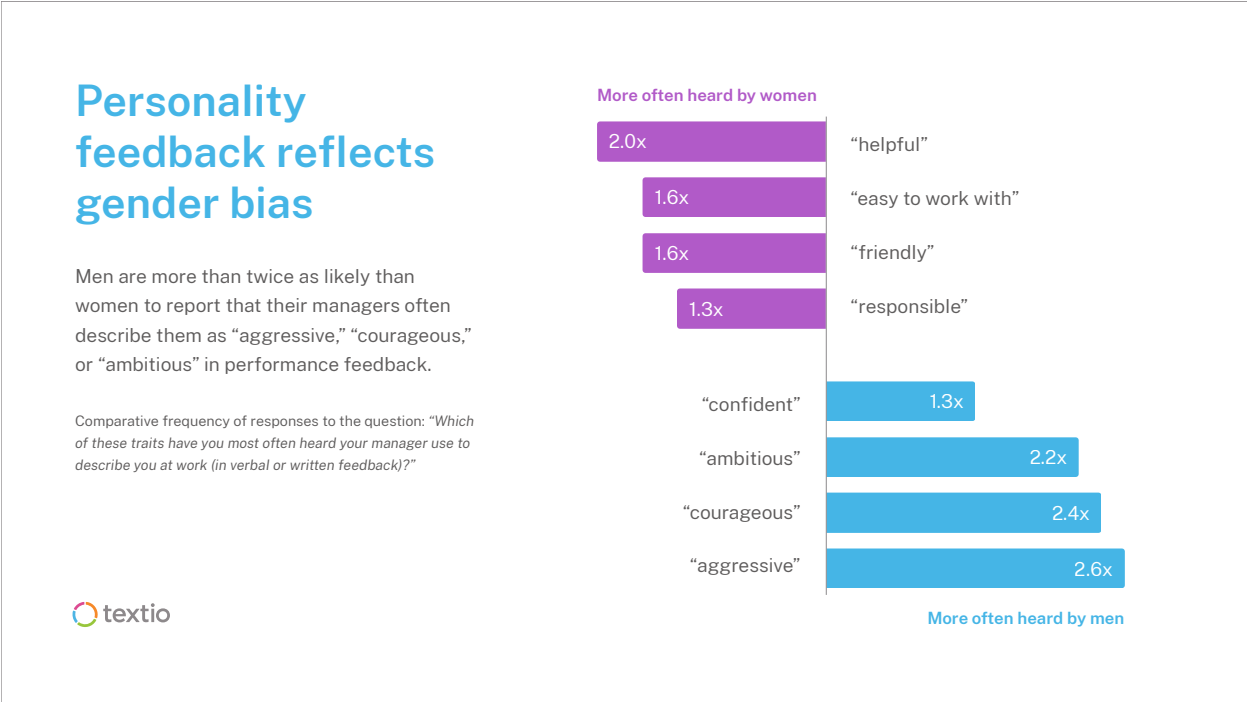
One insight from last year's report was how much more likely workers from underrepresented groups are to get feedback about their personalities rather than about their work. Women specifically get 22% more personality feedback from their managers than men do. Whether positive or negative, personality feedback is inherently less actionable than feedback about actual 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.



This year we saw the same patterns. For instance:

- Men report being called **ambitious** 2x more often than women
- Women report being called **helpful** 2x more often than men
- Hispanic people report being called **passionate** 2x more often than white people
- White people report being called **easy to work with** 2x more often than Asian people

As in last year’s report, personality feedback showed substantial gender bias, with both men and women receiving highly stereotyped feedback:



The bottom line: this year, we see the same broad patterns of bias in feedback that we published in the 2022 report. But this year, we asked some new questions about people’s feedback experiences. In particular, we asked participants how clear they feel on their development areas, and specifically whether they are clear on what they need to do to earn their next promotion.

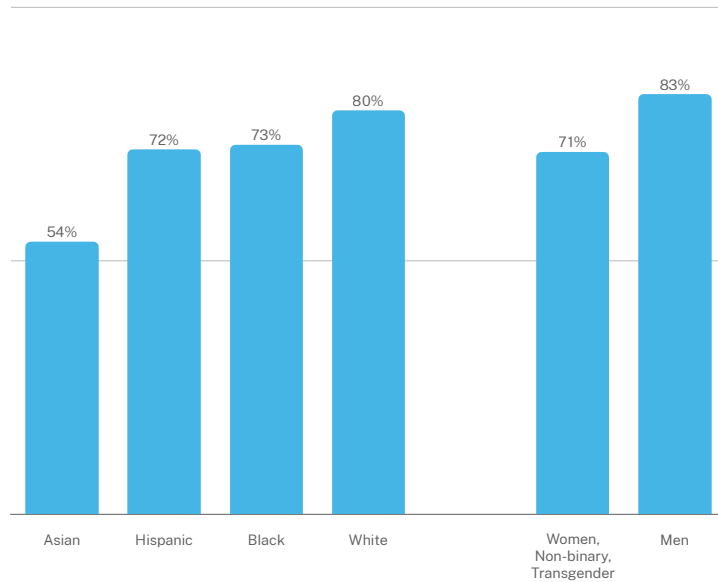
Across all participants, 76% of people agree that they have a good understanding of the skills their manager expects them to demonstrate to earn their next promotion, or are neutral; 13% of people actively disagree. But the actual numbers vary widely by gender identity and race.

83% of men say that they understand what’s required to earn their next promotion, in contrast to only 71% of women and people of other gender identities. For white people, 80% understand what’s required, but only 54% of Asian people do.

Who gets the highest quality performance feedback?

White men are the group most likely to report receiving high quality feedback in their work.

Percentage of employees who 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."



These findings are striking, if not entirely surprising. Our 2022 report showed that women and people of color receive much more feedback that is neither direct nor actionable. In other words, women and people of color are significantly less likely to receive the kind of feedback that leads to promotion and growth.

What does this mean for employee retention?

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

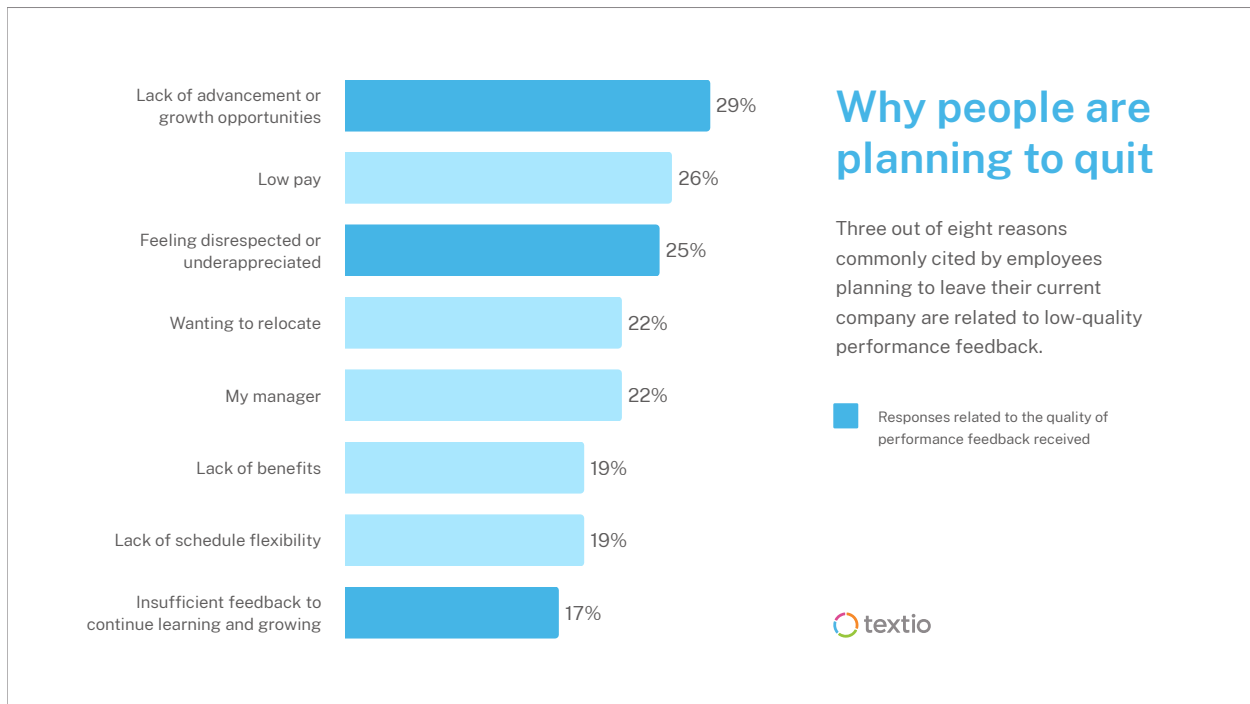
We've established that people from underrepresented groups get lower-quality feedback. We've also seen that people from these groups say they're less likely to be with their current organizations a year from now. If you're suspecting these are related, and that feedback quality overall matters to employee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



This insight made us want to dive deeper into the 38% of survey participants who replied “yes” to at least one of these two questions:

- Do you expect to leave your organization in the next 12 months?
- Have you interviewed for a role outside of your current organization in the past 12 months?

We asked the people considering departure to describe their reasons why:



As you can see, people indicated a variety of reasons for considering roles outside their current organizations, ranging from money to greater flexibility to relocation. But several of the reasons cited tie directly to the feedback they're getting on the ground (or not getting, as the case may be).

“**Insufficient feedback**” was specifically named by 17% of respondents as a primary reason they're looking for a new role, with numerous other participants citing highly feedback-adjacent reasons such as “**feeling underappreciated**” or “**lack of growth opportunities**.”

Here too, we see gendered patterns in people's responses. Women report feeling disrespected or underappreciated 1.3x more often than men. Non-binary, gender-nonconforming, and transgender respondents cite receiving insufficient feedback 1.5x more often than men.

Moreover, when we look closely at the cohort of survey participants 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.



Wrap-up of survey insights

In this section, we've looked at the relationship between feedback quality, demographic identity, and employee retention through the lens of survey data.

So far, we've found:

- Just because someone says they're not planning to leave your organization **doesn't mean they're not interviewing**. Men are significantly more likely to have interviewed for roles outside their organizations despite stating their intent to stay put.
- Just as in the 2022 report, workplace feedback shows demographic bias. Women and people of color receive the **lowest-quality feedback** across the board. Specifically, women and people of color get more **personality feedback**, and they're **less likely to be clear on what they need to work on** in order to earn their next promotion.
- Holding other factors constant, people receiving **low-quality feedback** are 63% more likely to leave their organizations than everyone else.
- 17% of people planning to leave their organizations specifically cite **insufficient feedback** as a primary reason they're looking for new roles.
- 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.

Now let's look at real performance reviews and see if the same patterns play out. When people receive low-quality feedback, are they more likely to leave?

Conversely, when they receive high-quality feedback, are they more likely to stick around?

What happens when feedback isn't actionable?

The first half of this report looked at how people report their workplace experiences and intentions. We surveyed people on the feedback they've received as well as on their plans to stay with or leave their current organizations. As we saw, this self-reported data shows a strong connection between the quality of feedback people get and their decision to stay or leave. The patterns are also demographically pronounced, with women and people of color receiving lower-quality feedback overall.

In this section, we'll turn to a longitudinal performance review data set to see if the same patterns hold. In particular, we want to understand whether people who get low-quality feedback in their written performance feedback are less likely to be in the organization a year later. As we'll discover, the answer is yes.

This year's performance review data set

To explore this, we looked at the performance reviews of a large, international enterprise organization with a variety of roles. The data set contains performance reviews for more than 13,000 employees across two annual review cycles. For each person, the data set includes:

- The written performance review text
- Their numeric performance rating
- Employee tenure
- Job level
- Gender identity
- Race and ethnicity identity (for US-based employees only)

Because we have two years of data, we can see whether an employee in the Year 1 data set is also included in the Year 2 data set. In other words, for each employee, we can see both the quality of their written performance feedback and their retention or attrition outcome the following year.

In the discussion above, we saw that women and people of color receive more personality feedback than everyone else. One problem with personality feedback is that it's 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 gives the recipient an alternative to their current approach.

Compare the following three pieces of feedback:

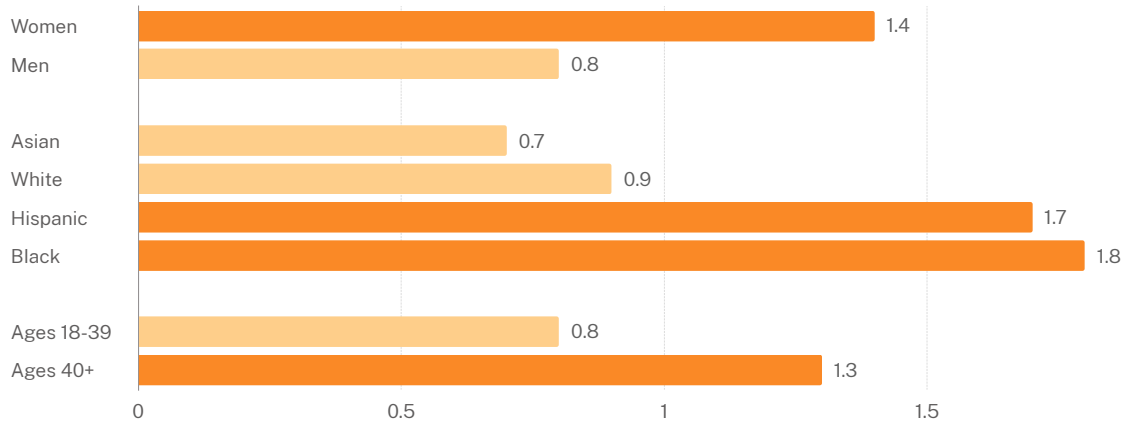
- “You often interrupt people in meetings.”
- “You often interrupt people in meetings. In last month's project review, your teammate was trying to share a perspective on our launch date. She never got to finish her observations because you interrupted her and changed the topic.”
- “You often interrupt 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 “women 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.”

In Textio's 2022 report on bias in performance feedback, we corroborated this insight. We saw that women receive 22% more personality feedback in their formal performance reviews than men do. Black and Hispanic workers and people over 40 also get much more personality feedback than their coworkers. Additionally, it showed that that women, Black and Hispanic people, and people over 40 get significantly less actionable feedback than their coworkers.

Frequency of feedback that isn't actionable



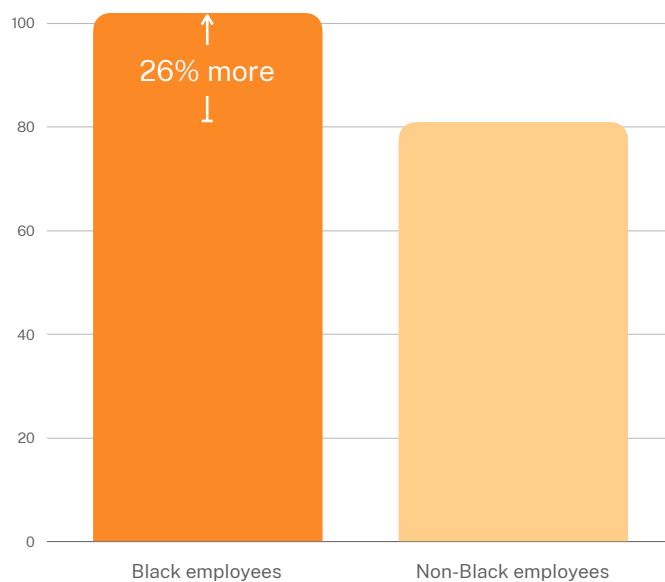
Source: 2022 Textio Language Bias in Performance Feedback report

This year's data repeated these patterns. For instance, Black employees in this year's enterprise data set get substantially less actionable feedback than all other groups.

Black employees get far more unactionable feedback

Black employees receive 26% more unactionable performance feedback than non-Black employees

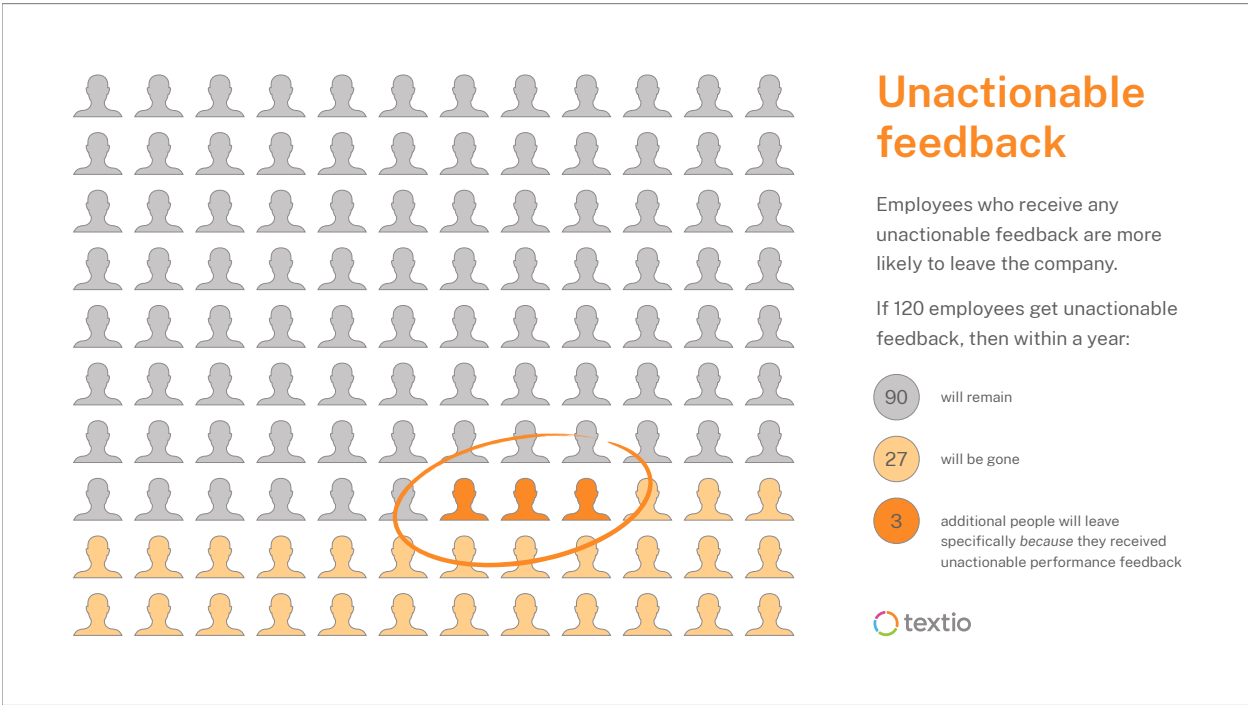
Number of instances of unactionable performance feedback per 100,000



If people who receive less actionable feedback are also more likely to leave their organizations, then these demographic disparities compound. In other words, the disparities in feedback quality predict comparable disparities in employee retention rates, promotion rates, and pay over time.

For this analysis, we wanted to isolate the impact of written feedback on employee retention. As such, we controlled for other factors in our data that we thought might confound this insight; for instance, we controlled for items like numeric performance rating and employee tenure. It is reasonable to believe that these other factors might have independent influence on employee retention and attrition patterns, and it's also reasonable to suspect that they might be interrelated. We opted to control for these other factors so that we could specifically understand whether low-quality feedback could itself be seen as a cause of employee attrition.

It turns out the answer is yes—people who receive unactionable feedback are more likely to leave the organization than people who receive more actionable feedback. To visualize this impact, if 120 people get unactionable feedback, 30 of them will leave your organization for a combination of reasons. That's a 25% attrition rate. That's higher than the 20% average rate reported by SHRM, and it's much higher than the 10% rate that is viewed as the gold standard in HR. Statistically, 3 of those 30 departing employees will leave specifically because they received unactionable feedback.



This is particularly problematic when you consider the scope of the attrition risk this poses: 50% of the people in our data set received at least some feedback that was not actionable. In this data set, that's an additional 163 people leaving the organization who would have stuck around had they received useful, actionable feedback instead. And because of the demographic disparities in which groups receive actionable feedback, these 163 people are a lot more likely to come from underrepresented groups.

How much does it cost to hire someone new into these roles? A lot more than it would have cost to give current employees relevant feedback on the job.

Shying away from giving direct feedback causes employees to quit

Our data above makes it clear that people who get actionable feedback are more likely to stay in their organizations. We also saw that fully half the employees in our data set received at least some unactionable feedback. You can significantly change your employee retention patterns, both overall and for underrepresented groups in particular, by making sure that all employees receive actionable feedback regularly.

Even when feedback is relevant, specific, and actionable, though, managers often struggle to provide the feedback clearly and directly. Perhaps seeking to avoid conflict, it's common for managers to shy away from providing direct feedback, especially when the feedback is critical in nature.

Writing in Harvard Business Review, Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic shares that although almost 70% of feedback recipients will perform above average, 30% of feedback interventions actually hurt performance—and the top reason feedback interventions fail is that the feedback is vague, unclear, or indirect.

What does conflict-avoidant, indirect feedback look like in action?

Sometimes it means not giving feedback at all.

For example, in our 2022 data, we saw that Black people received only 78% as much feedback overall as their white and Asian coworkers. In this year's data set, Black people received 79% as much feedback as their white and Asian coworkers. The numbers are remarkably consistent year over year.

Even when feedback is provided, it may be provided in conflict-avoidant and indirect ways. The practice of **hedging**, where the feedback provider hides their intended feedback within less direct language, is common. Consider the differences between:

- “You need to communicate blocking issues way ahead of time”
- “I would **encourage you to** communicate blocking issues way ahead of time”

- “Make sure you get feedback from all partners before the meeting”
- “You **may want to** get feedback from all partners before the meeting”

- “You’ll have to finish the rough draft this week”
- “You **might consider** finishing the rough draft this week”

In each example above, the manager is trying to communicate a specific ask that the employee is meant to understand as a requirement. While the first sentence in each pair makes the requirement clear, the second sentence contains hedging language that dilutes the ask.

With hedging language, the manager may think they’re communicating a requirement, but the employee is more likely to hear it as an option to consider. The use of problematic hedging language is pervasive, with a third of people in this year’s data set receiving this kind of feedback.

Getting hedging feedback is confusing for any employee, but as with other kinds of problematic feedback, people from underrepresented groups receive hedging feedback most often.

For instance, in 2022, Lily Jampol and Vivian Zayas at Cornell University published [seminal research on gender and workplace feedback](#). In two separate experiments, Jambol and Zayas found that managers give female employees softened, less honest messages about their performance that could hinder accurate self-assessment and improvement. In their experiments, no such tendency was apparent when giving feedback to men.

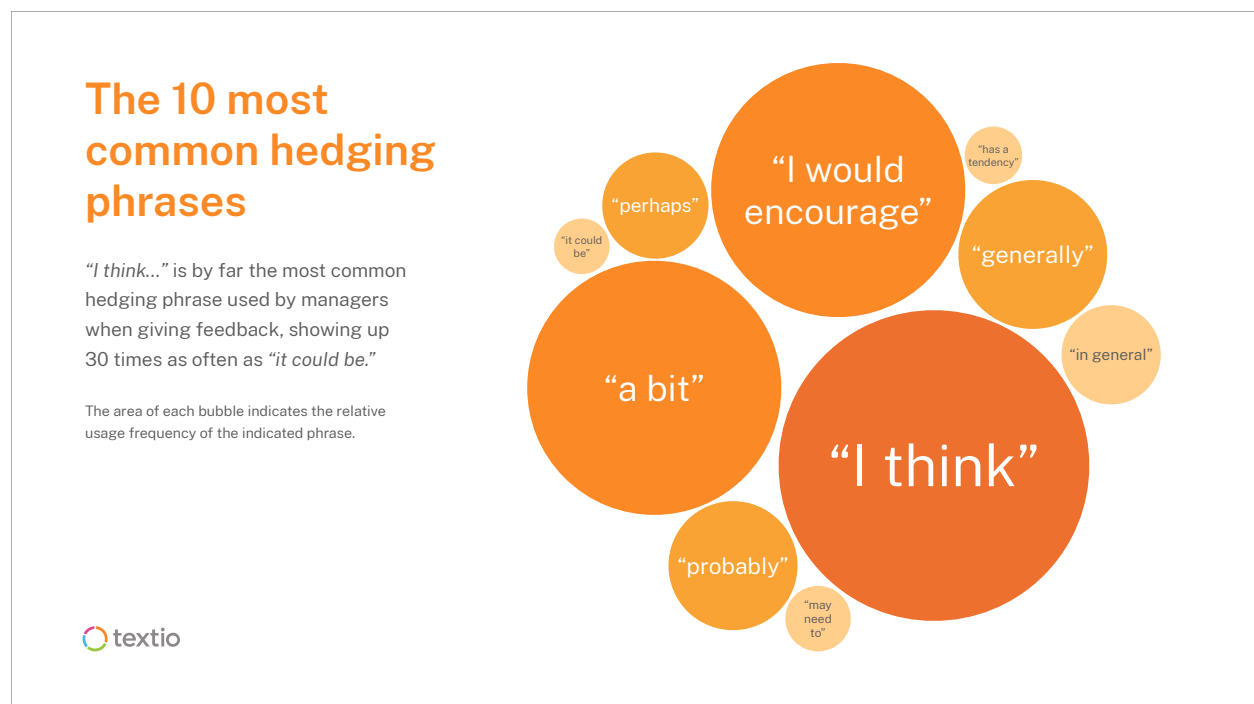
Insights: Are people who get less direct feedback more likely to leave?

On the ground, by far the most common phrase used in hedging feedback is **I think**.

Like other hedging language, **I think** statements effectively create distance between the feedback giver and the feedback being given. By introducing feedback with an **I think** statement, the manager is communicating that their point of view might just be a matter of opinion and that they may not be fully committed to it. This is problematic in negative feedback, where the manager who hedges ends up being unclear about their expectations.

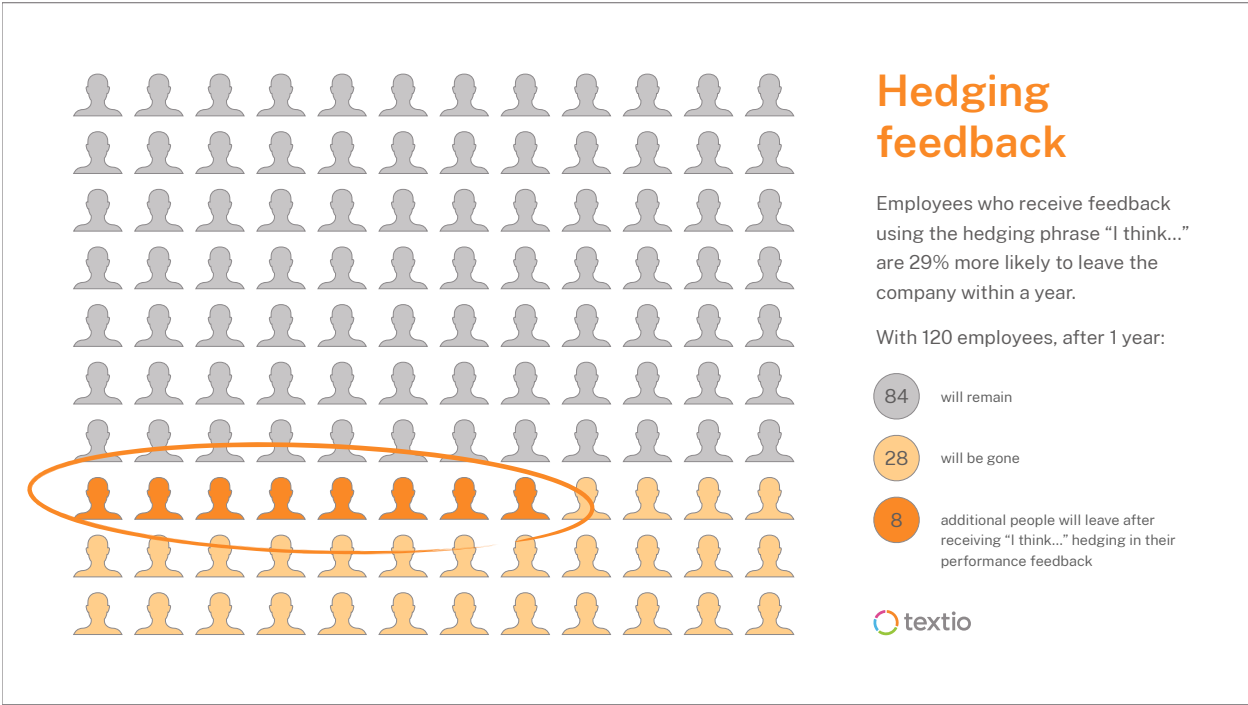
It's also problematic in in positive feedback, where the manager inadvertently communicates doubt about the praise they're giving:

- *"I think you should finish the project by Friday"* vs. *"I expect you to finish the project by Friday"*
- *"I think you did a good job on that presentation"* vs. *"You did a good job on that presentation"*



Given the prevalence of **I think** statements, as well as the demographic patterns within hedging feedback in general, we wanted to see whether the use of these statements had any impact on employee retention and attrition patterns.

The effect is remarkable: people who get performance reviews containing **I think** hedging statements are 29% more likely to leave the company within a year than everyone else.



In other words, when managers avoid providing direct feedback in an attempt to be kinder or more tactful, their efforts backfire. Employees who receive hedging feedback are significantly more likely to leave the company.

Wrap-up of performance review insights

In this section, we've looked at the relationship between feedback quality, demographic identity, and employee retention through the lens of a longitudinal performance review data set. We've found:

- Underrepresented groups get **lower-quality feedback** than their coworkers. For instance, Black people get significantly **less actionable feedback** than everyone else.
- The data shows that getting **unactionable feedback** is a primary driver of attrition for some employees, and on its own, will cause some people to leave their organizations.
- 50% of the people in our data set received at least some **feedback that was not actionable** in their written performance reviews, so the attrition risk is significant. Because people from underrepresented groups receive **less actionable feedback** to start with, the attrition risk is even greater for these groups.
- People who get performance reviews containing **"I think" hedging statements** are 29% more likely to leave the company within a year than everyone else.

In other words, both our survey data and our performance review data set tell the same story:

- Feedback quality is a **strong driver of employee retention and attrition**
- Women of all races and people of color of all gender identities are the most likely to get **low-quality feedback**

What talent leaders need to know

Using both survey data and a longitudinal performance review data set, we've explored the relationship between workplace feedback and employee retention, with a particular focus on understanding disproportionate impact that may be felt by different demographic groups.

Our analysis of these questions is unusually comprehensive and data-driven, but the insights in this report are far from surprising. DEI leaders have known for years that women and people of color leave their organizations at higher rates than their coworkers. HR leaders have been saying for decades that feedback matters. That begs the question: if everyone knows about these issues, why haven't we fixed them?

One thing is clear: many organizations are spending big money to try to solve this problem. Last year, organizations spent nearly \$350B globally on corporate training, 40% of that in the United States alone. About half of this budget goes specifically towards training for managers and people leaders. While large organizations spend about \$1,600 per employee on training across the board, they spend over four times this amount for managers. Unfortunately, it doesn't appear to be working; the year-over-year patterns in the data we reviewed in this report are remarkably consistent.

Ultimately, the only way to change this data is by implementing real systems of measurement and accountability. This has two parts: (1) setting accountabilities for managers and measuring them, and (2) providing managers the tools and resources to improve their skills.

Setting accountabilities for managers

Put simply, an accountability is something that you'd fire someone for if they didn't deliver on it. How many organizations define real manager accountabilities for frequency and quality of the employee feedback they provide? Very few. But for those that do, they see a difference.

Last year, we connected with a Fortune 100 organization that was serious about DEI and manager capability. The people team defined distinct accountabilities as part of manager job descriptions for all roles. The accountabilities include items like:

- Every manager provides each of their employees with a written feedback document 2x a year. Feedback documents do not contain instances of bias.
- Every manager submits a formal growth plan for each of their employees 1x a year.
- Every manager writes a quarterly business update for their teams 4x a year.
- Every manager's job descriptions score a minimum of 90 in Textio and are gender-neutral.

The activities defined by the leadership team are not just a wish list of nice-to-haves. They are real accountabilities that the leadership team formally tracks with systems and software. Feedback documents and growth plans have to be submitted and stored in the company's HRIS. Quarterly business updates are published to a central site. Job post scores are tracked with Textio.

Just as managers are accountable for their other business deliverables, they are accountable for these deliverables as well. In other words, a manager's own performance review depends on successful completion of these activities; if a manager is not doing them, they don't get a good review, and they can't get promoted.

If you're a talent or DEI leader, the most important step you can take to make real improvement in employee retention is defining the manager accountabilities that you're serious about. If you want to close the feedback gap, then you have to set accountabilities for how managers provide feedback, including around frequency, quality, and avoiding bias. Then you have to be willing to use these accountabilities as an essential part of how managers in your organization are reviewed and rewarded.

Providing managers the tools and resources to improve their skills

Once you've defined clear manager accountabilities around feedback frequency, quality, and fairness, you need to make sure that managers have the support required to deliver on these accountabilities. This means providing managers active coaching on their ability to give effective and equitable feedback.

Manager training is one facet. If you're looking for an easy way to get started, [Textio offers a free certification course](#) on how to provide effective and unbiased feedback. But while one-time training is a good way to kick off the conversation, it doesn't work well if it's your entire strategy. Managers need in-the-moment coaching to improve their skills. Especially in large organizations, this means [making a software investment](#) alongside your training investment, so that managers can get real-time coaching as they prepare feedback for their employees. It also means ongoing partnership with skilled HR professionals along the way.

Employee retention is your recruiting secret advantage

Even in the most constrained hiring market, high performers have their choice of where to work. In the limited hiring market of 2023, employee retention has become the HR north star. This is especially true in organizations that take DEI seriously.

Companies who focus on DEI only in the recruiting process may hire talented and diverse teams, but if your organization has a revolving door, your DEI efforts never make much progress.

Retaining and growing the talented and diverse team you've hired is the real goal. Ultimately, this drives the success of your DEI recruiting efforts too—people are more likely to join organizations where they see people like themselves thriving.

In summary:

- **Feedback quality** is a strong driver of employee retention and attrition. People who don't receive **direct, actionable feedback** are significantly more likely to leave their roles.
- Some people systematically get **lower-quality feedback** than others. Women of all races and people of color of all gender identities are the most likely to get **low-quality feedback**.
- If you want to improve employee retention, especially among underrepresented groups, you must commit to and invest in the accountabilities, tools, and systems that help managers give **direct and actionable feedback**.

Appendix: Methodology

Survey methodology

In the summer of 2023, we surveyed a wide range of working professionals on the quality and characteristics of feedback they receive, as well as whether they're planning to leave their current role and why. Our focus was to investigate whether a link existed between feedback quality and respondents' intention to leave their current role (retention). Our final survey dataset includes 533 working professionals in the United States.

We assessed respondents' perceived feedback quality via their level of agreement with the statement, "I have a good understanding of the skills my manager expects me to demonstrate in order to earn my next promotion." Respondents were given a 5-point, single-select scale to express their level of agreement (Strongly Agree – Strongly Disagree).

In order to isolate the impact of perceived feedback quality, we used propensity score to control for confounding variables and isolate the impact of perceived low-quality feedback on a respondent's likelihood to plan to leave their current role in the coming year. The causal impact (Average Treatment Effect, or ATE) of low-quality feedback was estimated using logistic regression, with propensity score included as a controlling feature.

Performance review methodology

While the survey component served to link perceived feedback quality to employee retention, we wanted to go a step further and understand which objective feedback characteristics were similarly linked to employee retention. To do this, we again paired our survey research with an analysis of employees' performance feedback.

We extended the large company data set from last year's analysis (includes performance feedback and demographics from 13,007 people all working for the same large organization) and paired it with a second feedback cycle a year after the first. In so doing, we were able to connect objective signals of low-quality feedback (e.g., indirect feedback) with whether those employees were still present in the second feedback cycle.

We again used propensity scores to reduce the effects of confounding factors and calculated the causal impact of low-quality feedback on employee retention using logistic regression, with the propensity score as a controlling variable. We evaluated several classes of low-quality feedback, including unactionable, personality, hedging, exaggerations, fixed mindset, and cliches and jargon.

We further broke out three of these categories to particular patterns that were used commonly within the dataset. We adjusted for multiple statistical comparisons using the Benjamini-Hochberg procedure.

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 identity 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.