



Who's The Boss? How Managers Can Handle Gender Bias From Their Own Subordinates

Insights

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As a manager, you're trained to identify discrimination and harassment when you see it. You see it when a manager in another department isn't being fair to subordinates of another race. You're familiar with your obligations when you find out that two of your top salespeople are dating. You know that your company's policies prohibit delivery vendors from harassing your office manager. But what happens when the threat comes from inside? What about when your own subordinates don't respect you because of gender bias?

The Insidious Problem Of Internal Bias From Below

Because your employees don't typically have the ability to write up or fire their manager, bias that comes from below doesn't have the same practical impact as bias that comes from above. After all, your employees can't use the firm disciplinary process to carry out discriminatory objectives against their own managers. However, bias from subordinates can be just as undermining to an organization as managerial discrimination.

There are consistent ways that bias from subordinates shows up. For example, female managers tend to get less respect from subordinates than their male colleagues. In one instance, a female founder and CEO reported realizing that her senior male employees had the authority to "speak business truths," whereas her recommendations were simply perceived as "thoughts" or "feelings." Another tech entrepreneur noted that, during interviews, candidates often assumed that her husband was the one with a technical background and, accordingly, directed answers to technical interview questions to him. Other female business owners and managers report that subordinates are more likely to offer unsolicited critical feedback about the way their companies invest, market, or strategize.

Female managers at every level also report having higher expectations placed on them by their subordinates – both in the tasks that they perform and the way that they perform them. Female employees are more likely to be tasked with the role of caretaker or "Office Mom," made responsible for keeping the office birthday calendar up-to-date, planning social gatherings, or ensuring the office is stocked with coffee. Women are also responsible for policing their own tone, often charged with giving instructions in a way that doesn't come across as "too pushy." All of these efforts constitute additional work, but none of it is work that helps women advance into leadership positions.

Further, women who violate norms or push back against stereotypes in the workplace are often punished for it. A female employee who is expected to be compassionate and instead acts forcefully, is more likely to be labeled as “uncaring” instead of “decisive.” The empirical evidence supporting these stereotypes is overwhelming. In one study, male employees who expressed anger in a professional context were conferred higher status than men who expressed sadness. However, both male and female evaluators conferred lower status on angry female professionals than on angry male professionals. Another study found that female employees who succeed in traditionally male areas were disliked by evaluators – until the evaluators found out that some of the female employees were mothers. Another study concluded that male evaluators penalized female candidates more than male candidates for initiating negotiations for higher compensation.

Practical Suggestions

With issues of bias coming from all directions, how is a supervisor to respond? First, you can be proactive by watching out for traits of potentially problematic employees in interviews. During job interviews, does the candidate direct answers to interviewers of both genders or only the male interviewer? Keep in mind that, by hiring an employee who holds gender biases, you aren’t the only person that would be exposed to problematic behavior. Indeed, if the biased employee engages in misconduct toward his coworkers or his own subordinates, the company could end up on the hook for a discrimination or harassment claims.

You also have options for addressing issues with existing employees. As a supervisor, you’re still an employee of the company and covered by its equal employment opportunity and anti-harassment policies. Therefore, if you feel that you are experiencing discrimination or bias at work, you should always report that information to Human Resources or another member of company leadership. The company may decide to conduct a training for all employees, or address the issue with the employee individually (or both).

Additionally, keep in mind that your company policies likely prohibit insubordination – from wherever it is rooted. If an employee is being disrespectful or outwardly hostile toward their manager, that should be treated and addressed as misconduct.

Male members of leadership also need to invest in identifying and resolving issues of bias toward female supervisors. For instance, keep the above stereotypes in mind the next time an employee complains that a female supervisor’s instructional email was “pushy.” Look at the email objectively. If the tone was a problem, address it with the supervisor. If the tone was appropriate, consider whether the employee’s perception of the email is rooted in bias.

Also, take care to ensure that you don’t strip female supervisors of their authority by helping them deal with problem employees. Keeping with the above example, it may not be an effective strategy for the female supervisor to draft the email, send it to you, and have you send it to the employee. Although you solve the short-term problem because the employee accepts the message underlying the email, the company misses a valuable opportunity to address the employee’s bias and, further,

undermines the female supervisor's authority.

Implicit bias trainings can be useful tools in addressing issues of implicit and explicit bias in the workplace, in part because they give employees the tools they need to identify problems as they arise. After all, it's impossible to remedy the effects of a harmful stereotype if you don't recognize it. However, trainings must be accompanied by firm policies and procedures and a culture of respect and inclusion.

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