

Bosses face more discrimination if they are women – from employees of any gender

October 17 2019, by Martin Abel



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Imagine that your boss Ethan calls you into his office. He expresses disappointment in your recent performance and lack of commitment. How would you react? Accept the feedback and put in more effort? Would you pout in your office and start looking for a new job?

Now, would your reaction be different if your boss was not named Ethan but Emily?

I'm a [professor of economics](#), and [my research](#) investigates this very question. We hired 2,700 workers online to transcribe receipts, randomly assigning a male or female name to a manager and randomly assigning which workers would receive performance feedback.

Results show that both [women](#) and men react more negatively to criticism if it comes from a woman. Our subjects reported that criticism by a woman led to a larger reduction in job satisfaction than criticism by a man. Employees were also doubly disinterested in working for the firm in the future if they had been criticized by a female boss.

This has important implications for the success of women in leadership. If using feedback is more likely to backfire for women in positions of power, they may adopt [less effective management strategies or become altogether less interested](#) in holding leadership positions.

Women in the workplace

Women make up [45% of employees](#) of S&P 500 firms. Yet, they only make up 37% of managers at the midlevel, 26% at the senior level and 5% of CEOs.

This is true despite women having overtaken men in [educational attainment](#). They have also begun [scoring higher on leadership competency tests](#) in recent years.

Existing studies [do not find clear evidence of gender discrimination](#) against job applicants for upper management. Due to methodological constraints, such research typically focuses on hiring for [entry-level positions](#).

Discrimination in promotion is much harder to study, as work interactions are harder for researchers to observe.

Why discrimination?

Women in upper management are not simply being ignored. Workers hired for the transcription in our study actually spent slightly more time reading and thinking about feedback from female managers.

Neither can [implicit biases](#) explain why employees are less likely to take criticism well from women. While we found that workers in this study were on average more likely to subconsciously associate men with career and women with family, this tendency does not predict whether they discriminate against female bosses.

Discrimination is also not a lack of exposure to female supervisors. Workers stating that their previous female supervisor was highly effective were just as likely to discriminate.

Instead, what seems to drive the results are gendered expectations of management styles. [Other studies](#) have shown that workers are three times more likely to associate giving praise with female managers and twice more likely to associate giving criticism with male managers. People react negatively if something [violates their expectations](#).

Case in point: critical female bosses.

It remains unclear to what extent results from this study generalize to more traditional work settings. Yet, the "[gig economy](#)" and other remote work arrangements are a [rapidly expanding](#) part of the economy.

Some have argued that [these jobs offer more flexibility](#) and thus particularly benefit women. However, findings from this study highlight

additional concerns about [discrimination](#) in the gig economy due to lack of regulatory oversight and equal opportunity protections in these jobs.

What can be done?

Recently, some firms started trying to stem discrimination against women in management positions.

Several have employed "[feedback coaches](#)," teaching workers to focus on the content of feedback rather than the identity of the person providing it. There is also evidence that [informing people of their biases may affect their behavior](#).

Other research suggests that [highlighting specific credentials of women in leadership](#) – such as [positive evaluations or reference letters](#) – may be an effective remedy.

To end on a hopeful note: Discrimination against female bosses in my study is lower among younger workers and disappears for those in their 20s. Though younger employees may discriminate more as they age, it could be that this is a generational shift.

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