

Does accountability always work? Workplace bias suppression can be difficult to sustain, study shows

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Decision-making that overrides one's personal views and self-interests, also known as bias suppression, is often touted as an essential

institutional objective. Accountability is a common strategy for discouraging stubborn biases. However, even within the most well-intentioned organizations, efforts to counteract biases tend to wane over time.

New research from the University of Notre Dame shows when and why [bias](#) suppression is so challenging to sustain from one decision to the next.

"When and Why Bias Suppression is Difficult to Sustain: The Asymmetric Effect of Intermittent Accountability" is forthcoming in the *Academy of Management Journal* from Brittany Solomon and Cindy Muir (Zapata), management professors at Notre Dame's Mendoza College of Business, along with Matthew Hall, the David A. Potenziani Memorial College Professor of Constitutional Studies, concurrent law professor and director of Notre Dame's Rooney Center for the Study of American Democracy.

Accountability in the workplace happens when executives and employees responsible for upholding values, making decisions and accomplishing goals deliver on expectations. But accountability can backfire.

"Across multiple studies, we found that bias suppression with high accountability induces counterfactual thinking," Solomon said. "In other words, the decision maker questions what would, could or should have transpired had they chosen differently. Then they regret the decision they made and ultimately—with subsequent low accountability—reverse their action."

However, this process does not occur when accountability is initially low, then subsequently high.

"We found that when accountability changes from high to low, bias suppressed decisions tend to be reversed," Solomon said. "When accountability changes from low to high, biased decisions are sustained. For example, a manager with high accountability may avoid showing favoritism to a subordinate who is also a friend. If the manager no longer feels such pressure in the future, they are more likely to favor that friend over other subordinates. However, a manager who initially has little or no accountability may show favoritism to their friend and continue favoring that friend over subordinates even when they are highly accountable."

When [decision makers](#) expect to be held accountable and suppress their biases when rendering a decision, their cognitive and emotional processing plays a substantial role in undermining bias suppression the next time they have to make a similar decision.

"Even if their bias suppression efforts are initially successful, their counterfactual thinking and feelings of regret for not following their personal instincts or preferences are so strong that people tend to reverse their unbiased decisions," Solomon said. "This is surprising because people tend to strive toward consistency in their [decision-making](#). And it means that bias suppression is not self-reinforcing."

The team examined S&P 500 firms' CEOs to establish there is a negative relationship between bias suppression and consistency. Then, in Study 1, they examined decisions by U.S. Supreme Court justices that were later revisited in a similar case. Study 2 used recalls of actual managerial decisions and Study 3 used hypothetical scenarios. With CEOs and Supreme Court justices, the researchers focused on suppressing political ideology—a bias that shapes a wide array of preferences that has been shown to impact managerial decision-making. Because bias suppression can also be conceptualized broadly, they relied on a generic conceptualization of bias in studies 2 and 3.

The study suggests that increasing accountability may not be as effective if a person initially indulges their biases, and an exploratory analysis suggests that pride may be the reason.

"People often opt to indulge their biases and continue doing so, despite high accountability, because they view the biased decision as the right decision," Solomon said. "Indeed, that is likely why they feel proud. Although people are unlikely to endorse making a biased decision, we found that they will admit to making a decision based on their self-interest or strong views."

Intermittent accountability, even when it increases, may not be a reliable solution for encouraging bias suppression in the future. The study suggests one should not exclusively rely on a decision maker's prior unbiased behavior when bestowing trust in someone to consistently suppress their biases.

Accountability mechanisms, such as decision-making transparency, monitoring and feedback, may be removed prematurely following one's successful bias suppression, especially given the substantial resources necessary to maintain high accountability. Thus, if organizations use compliance mechanisms like [accountability](#) as their primary strategy for discouraging biased decision-making, employing such mechanisms consistently may be key.

Extrapolating from the study findings, the authors suggest that more genuine efforts to instill organizational values in employees so that employees willingly embrace prioritizing the organization over their own personal interests and strong views may be more fruitful than relying primarily on compliance alone.

"Organizations should be more realistic about employees' ability or lack thereof to consistently suppress bias," Solomon suggested, "and may find

value in automating [decision](#) processes typically mired in bias."

More information: Brittany Solomon et al, When and Why Bias Suppression is Difficult to Sustain: The Asymmetric Effect of Intermittent Accountability, *Academy of Management Journal* (2021). [DOI: 10.5465/amj.2020.0441](https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2020.0441)

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