

## Why your performance rating may not be as good as you expect

by Dragan Milicevic on January 29, 2019

*"It's not what you say, but how you say it."*  
-Mae West

Jason was Head of Global Business Development of a multinational company with global reach in the steel industry, reporting directly to the CEO. He and his 10-person team were responsible for developing business strategy and leading the organization into the future. Jason had a 10 year track record not only in strategic planning, but also in building and running a business. During his first year and a half at the company, everything was going well for Jason. The feedback he was getting from key stakeholders in the organization regarding his strategy work was very positive. They thought that Jason's and his team's work was propelling the company's various business interests in the right direction. His boss, the CEO, seemed happy as well.



Towards the end of the second year, his boss asked Jason for a one-on-one conversation. To Jason's surprise, the conversation was about his performance. The CEO told Jason that things were not working out with him, that he should look for a new role within the organization, and that a successor was lined up to take over in his position soon. Jason was shocked and couldn't believe what he was hearing. What was happening here?

### The "truth" about performance ratings

I have been consulting organizations on designing performance management systems, delivering trainings and coaching executives on how to conduct inspiring performance conversations for 20 years. As a former competitive athlete, performance management has always been a core theme of my work. If you have been wondering why your performance rating is not as good as you expected, I might know one reason why. I have noticed that when managers rate an employee's performance as low, it is not always because of weak work performance or lack of skill or effort. When I ask them in trainings or coaching sessions why they think an employee is underperforming, they often give me answers like: "He is difficult to work with", "She does a great job but does not follow my directions", "He doesn't

support the team enough”, “The way he acts towards me is not particularly respectful”, “She says NO all the time”, “He has this 9-5 attitude”.

In probing into what is behind these comments, I have identified two types of biases that managers often unconsciously adopt. The first bias is called the “halo effect”. This is the tendency to let our assessment of one trait of an individual influence our assessment of other traits of the individual. In terms of a performance review, managers with the “halo effect” bias allow one performance criteria from the performance criteria set out by the organisation to overshadow others. For example, if a manager observes that an employee performs poorly in the area of “communications”, he or she might think the employee has performed poorly in other areas, even if that is not the case. The second bias is known as the “personal bias”. This bias reflects a manager’s feelings about his or her subordinates, whether he likes or dislikes them. This bias leads managers to assess a subordinate in terms of a criteria not included in the organisation’s performance management system. Studies show that eighty percent of managers admit that how much they like or dislike an employee affects their appraisal of that employee. Your manager may be one of them.

Unfortunately, simply pointing out to managers that they are subject to unconscious biases does not sufficiently motivate them to change their assessment. Even when managers know that their assessments are not objective, we must acknowledge that reality often diverges from objective ideals. The fact is that managers’ perceptions of the way their subordinates behave towards them and their subjective and often unconscious biases can matter more to them than the actual performance of their subordinates. For you as an employee, this can affect not only your performance ratings, but also promotion decisions and, ultimately, your entire career.

### **Assess your relationship with your manager**

Here are some helpful questions that you can ask yourself to get a sense of your relationship with your manager:

- Do I respect my manager even though he or she may not be the best I have ever had?
- Do I know what’s important to my manager and do I act in ways that advance my manager’s interests?
- Am I helping my manager to be successful?
- Am I making my manager’s life easy?
- Do I have a trust-based relationship with my manager?
- Is my communication style supportive?
- Can I put myself in my manager’s shoes and understand his or her viewpoint?
- Am I loyal to my manager?

If your answer to one of these questions is “no”, consider taking steps to improve your relationship with your manager. Here are some practical tips:

- Meet with your manager to talk about mutual expectations. This relaxed approach can help you understand what criteria are important to your manager over and beyond company performance review criteria.

- During your performance evaluation, ask your manager in what ways you have been helpful to him or her in the past year and what can you do to support him or her in the upcoming year. This demonstrates your interest in supporting him or her.
- Ask yourself every now and then: “If I were my own boss, would I enjoy working with myself?”

I am not arguing that it is good to be a yea-sayer. But I recommend considering three key points:

- Your manager is a human being, too, and the quality of your relationship matters a lot.
- Your manager must fight countless battles within the organization to achieve his or her objectives. He or she does not need additional battles with you.
- Unlike in competitive sports, work performance ratings are never truly objective.

Jason eventually left the organization and found a new and challenging role at another organisation. He later realized that he had never considered what was important to the CEO and that some of his recommendations may have been perceived as threatening to the CEO. He realised that when it comes to your relationship with your manager, how you say it matters more than what you say. In his new role, he has made a conscious effort to learn what is important to his manager and how he can support him. When I spoke to him months later he shared with me that “it not only helped influence the way my manager looked at my performance but, more interestingly, it also strengthened my relationship with him in ways I would never have expected.”