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## Self-promotion doesn't work equally for everyone

*Self-promotion is supposed to be the best way to make your manager notice your skills and achievements. But is it really? Together with colleagues, Jiaqing (Kathy) Sun researched a diverse group of professionals from a major global financial institution and found that when Black employees emphasise their achievements, White managers tend to rate them negatively.*

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Many of us have heard this advice thousands of times: if you want to succeed, make sure your boss knows about your achievements. Self-promotion—proactively speaking up about your competencies and accomplishments—is often suggested as an effective way to make a positive impression, especially for people from underrepresented groups. However, our study reveals that it doesn't work the same for everyone, and race plays a part.

We researched a diverse group of professionals from a major global financial institution and found that self-promotion may have negative unintended effects for Black employees. When they emphasise their achievements, some managers, particularly White ones, may respond with negative ratings of these employees' personal traits, such as confidence, warmth and capability. This reaction, which we label "racial backlash", did not appear for other racial groups in our study (including White, Asian, and Hispanic employees).

This backlash occurs because some managers hold stereotypical expectations that conflict with displays of competence and ambition from Black people. They often assume that Blacks have relatively low competency levels, so when Black employees confidently promote their skills, they unintentionally challenge these biased expectations, leading to adverse reactions.

The push for self-promotion is especially strong for Blacks, given the historical and present-day challenges they face in the workplace. Black professionals are still underrepresented in high-level positions, and many feel the need to demonstrate their skills to overcome barriers. Yet, despite their efforts, our study found that Black people's self-promotion can result in lower ratings in critical

areas like performance ratings and managers' assessments of "fit" within the company. These ratings directly affect opportunities for promotions and access to resources needed for growth and development.

## Recommendations for organisations

Although our study's findings relate to a large financial institution in the US, they may be applicable across sectors and in other countries, such as the UK. We would expect similar findings in any workplace where there is a high emphasis on competence and where Black employees are in the minority.

Our findings highlight the need for organisations to rethink how they handle diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). Here I present a few steps that can help.

### Stop encouraging self-promotion

The first is to stop advertising the "uplift" strategies that encourage Black employees to display and demonstrate their abilities to fight against biases. Similar to the fallacies in the "lean-in" messages, which led both female employees and organisations to believe it is women's obligation to clear the barriers in their career, organisations should stop implying employees in the disadvantaged group should consider their career difficulties as their own fault.

We often see this kind of suggestions in the media, but our study, along with previous research on "gender backlash", suggests this advice may need to be re-evaluated. Organisational leaders must address racial bias directly. It's not Black employees' responsibility to change their behaviour to avoid triggering stereotypes. Emphasising Black employees' responsibility to make changes may add another layer of discrimination to the existing biased system.

### Detect implicit biases

Our research suggests that implicit biases—unconscious or hidden ones—persist in performance appraisal systems and other essential HR areas. Although detecting unconscious bias is still a developing field in management research, companies can start by using training programs to raise the awareness of this issue. However, it should be noted that these training programs must be carefully designed to address the roots and impact of stereotypes, as simply acknowledging them can sometimes reinforce biases. Companies can also use data from HR systems, as we did in this study, to identify patterns that reveal biases.

### Tailor DEI policies to specific groups

Our findings on racial backlash highlight a management bias that has received little practical attention. Organisations should avoid grouping all “people of colour” as a monolith and instead apply a more nuanced approach for each racial category and intersectional group, such as Black women. The level of detail in examining biases should be informed by employees’ experiences, not organisational convenience.

## Advice for Black professionals

While the burden of addressing bias lies with organisations, Black employees can still adopt strategies to help navigate these challenges. For instance, working with mentors who understand the dynamics of racial bias may offer insights into effective self-promotion tactics. Building a network within and outside the organisation can also help to create a support system that goes beyond the perception of any single manager.

In closing, it’s essential to understand that self-promotion should be a tool for growth, not a disadvantage. Creating fair and transparent workplace systems is key to ensuring that all employees have equal opportunities to succeed.

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- This blog post is based on [The Cost of Managing Impressions for Black Employees: An Expectancy Violation Theory Perspective](#), by Sandy Wayne, Jiaqing Sun, Donald H Kluemper, Gordon W Cheung and Adaora Ubaka, in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.
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