

Question the ‘old halos’ you’ve created for your direct reports

Why do it?

Have you ever been guilty of jumping to conclusions about a direct report’s skills or potential, only to be proven wrong?

If so, you’re not alone. We’re all highly susceptible to “old halos” — our outdated, incomplete and frequently flawed impressions of others. Old halos get their name from a logical fallacy called the halo effect, which kicks in when we mistakenly assume that because people are good or bad at one thing, they’ll be equally good or bad at others.

Managers should be particularly wary of the old halos they’ve created for their direct reports. When you’re in a position to hire, reward, promote and dismiss other people, the last thing you need is a bunch of unquestioned assumptions wreaking havoc with your judgment.



How to do it:

- 1. Write down your general impressions of each of your direct reports.** Whom do you think of as highly competent? Whom are you reluctant to trust with more responsibility? Don’t consider why you feel the way you do about each person yet — just try to capture your current impressions.
- 2. List specific examples that back up each impression.** Let’s say you perceive one of your direct reports as unreliable. What recent examples of the person dropping the ball come to mind? Write them down.

If you can’t think of any — or can only think of some that are months or years old — you may have already found an old halo.

- 3. Play devil’s advocate with yourself.** Old halos persist, in part, because we like to think we’re good judges of character — and questioning our original assessments is a form of questioning our own capabilities. If you’re willing to play devil’s advocate with yourself, that’s a sign you’re willing to put your own ego aside in search of the truth.

For each direct report, try to brainstorm some recent examples that run counter to those you came up with in Step 2. For the direct report you think of as unreliable because of a missed deadline last month, can you name other examples of him or her coming through?

- 4. Ask your manager and/or peer managers for their impressions of your direct reports.** Another great way to check your assumptions is to solicit the opinions of others who have seen your direct reports in action. Does their input align with or refute your own impressions? What might they have learned about your direct reports that you’re totally unaware of?

It’s critical that you refrain from “leading the witness” when you seek input.

- Poor: *“I’ve been disappointed in Patrick lately — what do you think of his work?”*
- Better: *“Would you be willing to share your thoughts on Patrick’s strengths and weaknesses? I value your opinion, and hearing about your experiences working with him would really help round out my view of his skills.”*

Keep in mind that while it might be tempting to ask your direct reports about their views of one another (they often get the best window into what’s happening when you’re not around), the power dynamics might make it difficult for them to level with you. No one wants to be the team tattletale. However, be on the alert for subtle signs of appreciation and frustration from them that might help inform your impressions.

5. Take stock of how your impressions measure up. Was it easy to find examples and feedback to back up your views? What did you learn that surprised you? What might be going on that you’re still unaware of? Take a look at how things are adding up — you may find that you’ve uncovered some old halos you never knew were there.

More on uncovering biases and understanding your team

- [The halo effect’s effect on managers](#)
- [6 hidden hiring biases](#)
- [5 common career drivers that could help explain your direct reports’ behavior](#)