

# The halo effect: A devil of a problem for managers

What's the halo effect and why should you care? According to *The Economist*, it's "the phenomenon whereby we assume that because people are good at doing A they will be good at doing B, C and D (or the reverse — because they are bad at doing A they will be bad at doing B, C and D)."

That sounds pretty abstract, but the halo effect can have very real, and very scary, repercussions for managers (not to mention their direct reports).

A short history of its name demonstrates how it can mess with supervisors' minds. Back in 1920, a psychologist named Edward Thorndike turned a critical eye on the promotion of relatively young and inexperienced pilots into leadership roles in the military. He realized the pilots' feats in the air were so extraordinary their commanding officers assumed the pilots would be equally great leaders. This wasn't necessarily so. As Thorndike discovered, their flying skills had given them a "halo of general merit."

The halo effect can be just as problematic when a manager's impression of someone is negative. One wrong move — or one characteristic that rubs you the wrong way — and someone can become disproportionately tainted in your mind.

## It's not you — it's your brain

Is anyone on your team basking in the glow of an undeserved halo, or perhaps being unfairly overlooked? It's entirely possible, not because you're a bad manager, but because you're a human being. Unfortunately, we're all highly susceptible to the halo effect and other unconscious biases.

Behavioral economists like [Daniel Kahneman](#) have shown that humans are hard-wired to jump to conclusions rather than carefully think things through. This type of spontaneous, intuitive thinking has its benefits. It allows us to react quickly, as well as navigate a complex world without having to stop and analyze everything we encounter, which would surely drive us bonkers.

It also opens us up, in certain situations, to dangerous prejudices, biases and assumptions (e.g., "*She just doesn't seem like leadership material*") when it might be better to think more deeply (e.g., "*How am I defining leadership potential, and what's the best way to measure people based on the attributes and skills it takes to lead?*").

## 5 things you can do to fight the halo effect

You can't rewire your brain, but that doesn't mean you're helpless. Self-awareness — especially when the stakes are high — can be hugely beneficial. For managers, high-stakes situations might include:

- Hiring new team members
- Dismissing team members
- Filling out and conducting performance reviews
- Giving raises



- Choosing whom to promote and/or groom

In addition to heightening your awareness of the halo effect in these situations, you might want to:

**1. Slow down.** When you and your company are moving a mile a minute, it can start to feel like all that matters is getting things done — the faster, the better. But in high-stakes situations this attitude can be an invitation for the halo effect to take hold.

For example, is it really worth rushing to hire someone based on a gut feeling? Six months down the road, will you be glad you saved yourself the extra hassle of finding additional candidates — or will you be kicking yourself for inadvertently setting someone up to fail and causing morale problems on your team?

**2. Create and follow disciplined processes for complex tasks.** Managers who “wing it” when they’re doing something complex like conducting an interview are more likely to fall prey to the halo effect. According to this eye-opening [New York Times article](#), “Many studies show that unstructured, face-to-face interviews are biased; interviewers prefer candidates who are likeable, similar to them, and physically attractive — even if these qualities are irrelevant to performance.”

A good way to counteract or at least lessen these kinds of biases is to devise and follow carefully structured processes. For example, when you hire, you can start by identifying core competencies necessary for the open position and coming up with interview questions that will help you measure someone’s capabilities in those areas.

By asking the same questions of everyone you interview, it will also be easier to compare people’s answers. Plus, it will be more fair to the pool of candidates. See our [Hiring](#) topic for more tips.

**3. Get others involved.** Seeking input from others — especially those with expertise in the issue at stake, and who are likely to provide a different perspective — is an easy and effective way to get outside your own head.

Think carefully about how you ask for input. Consider the difference between telling someone you think a direct report is a perfect candidate for a promotion before asking what your colleague thinks, versus simply asking in a neutral tone of voice, “What are your thoughts?” The second approach is more likely to yield an authentic response.

**4. Avoid voicing premature opinions.** You can get yourself into a bind if you express opinions publicly before you’ve thought things through properly. When you do, you not only put yourself at greater risk of operating under the influence of the halo effect, but also bring your credibility into the mix. You’ll now feel the additional pressure of saving face — a powerful incentive to be less open to information that may prove you wrong down the road, but actually be right.

This is why smart managers often seek an evidence-based understanding of issues before taking a strong stand. No, you don’t want to fall prey to analysis-paralysis, but if someone wants an answer before you’re ready to provide one, you can just say, “I’m not sure yet — I’m working on it. Could you give me until \_\_\_\_\_?”

**5. Play devil’s advocate with your old halos.** Who on your team do you think is highly competent? Who’s not measuring up? It never hurts to periodically put deeply ingrained views under the microscope.

Try an exercise: write down specific examples of people’s performance and behavior that back up your impressions. Now play devil’s advocate with yourself. Are there any examples that provide a counterpoint to the original ones? A conscious effort to check your assumptions can save you from unthinkingly referring back to hazy, vague feelings that may be out of date or just plain wrong.

## Sources and suggested reading

- [Thinking, Fast and Slow](#) by Daniel Kahneman

- *The Halo Effect* by Phil Rosenzweig
- “Are You Picking the Right Leaders?” by Melvin Sorcher and James Brant
- “You Are Bad At Assessing People (But So Is Everyone Else)” by David McRaney
- “Trust the Evidence, Not Your Instincts” by Jeffrey Pfeffer and Bob Sutton