

The threat of smart people

You seek input from colleagues before picking which job candidates to hire or which workers to promote. It's admirable that you solicit their insights and impressions.

There's just one problem: Their input may not necessarily reflect a dispassionate or accurate analysis.

In a recent study, researchers found that individuals who are asked to recommend someone to fill a job opening or join a work team tend to choose a candidate that they deem inferior to themselves, especially when it comes to a skill they do well.

Say you see yourself as having a knack for selling. If your boss asks you to pick someone to join your project team, you'll select a co-worker who you think won't outshine you as a persuasive communicator.

The researchers call this the "social comparison bias" because we tend to compare how we stack up to others and feel threatened by those with stronger skills than our own. It's a form of self-protection that keeps our egos intact.

This research exposes a trap that can undermine success at your organization. If you get misguided advice from colleagues on whom to hire or promote, that's bad enough. But if everyone's afraid to work with a smarter peer, that's even worse.

As a manager, you can pierce the social comparison bias by welcoming others who possess strengths that you lack. If you know you're not a detailed thinker, surround yourself with meticulous colleagues who catch the little things you overlook.

When your staff sees that you're willing to bring in newcomers who plug holes in your skill set, they'll follow suit. The perceived threat of smarter people will fizzle and you'll wind up with a team that exhibits truly complementary skills.

Do you find smarter folks an asset or a threat?