

Summary of Paper: [Strategic Bias in Team Members' Communication about Relative Contributions: The Effects of Voluntary Communication and Explanation](#)

What is this study about?

This study examines how team members talk to managers about who contributed what to a team's results when bonuses are at stake. The authors focus on “strategic bias” – cases where people push for a bigger share of the team bonus than can be justified by their actual effort or output. They test two design choices that are very common in practice: (1) whether communication to the manager is mandatory or voluntary, and (2) whether employees must explain their suggested bonus allocations.

What are the major findings of the study?

In an experiment with 192 participants working in 4-person “firms” over eight periods, lower-ability team members showed much more strategic bias than other team members when communication was voluntary and no explanation was required. On average, they asked for roughly 17 percentage points more of the bonus than their relative input justified, versus about 5 percentage points under a mandatory system. When communication was voluntary and unexplained, managers' bonus allocations were also less aligned with true contributions and low-ability members exerted less effort. Requiring written explanations largely eliminated this bias by increasing their fairness concerns.

Why is the study important?

Accountants design and rely on performance evaluation and bonus systems that increasingly use 360-degree and peer feedback. This study shows that simply switching to a “voluntary feedback” model can materially distort information and weaken the link between pay and performance, especially among lower-performing employees.

What is the impact on professional practice and society at large?

For firms, poorly designed team communication can hurt team dynamics, misallocate bonuses, and reduce total effort, undermining shareholder value. Requiring concise explanations is a low-cost design tweak that improves the quality of peer information and supports more equitable, defensible bonus decisions—issues that matter for employee trust, perceptions of fairness, and, ultimately, retention and culture.

