GCHECK | Behind Better Teams



A GCHECK COMPLIANCE FOR GOOD® REPORT · THE TRUST RECESSION RESEARCH SERIES

The Performance Privilege

Same violation. A different rulebook for the top performers.

A November 2026 national experiment with 2,000 US workers on how an employee's performance level changes the way managers judge identical misconduct, and what coworkers expect once they report it.

2026 · 2,000 US workers surveyed · 893 managers



FIVE FINDINGS IN NINETY SECONDS

Key findings

49 vs 27%

PERCEPTION

Managers backing a policy exception for the same confirmed violation · Q15 · sensitivity sample n=205

The exception goes to the star

Once a duplicate expense was confirmed as knowing, managers were 1.8 times as likely to set policy aside for a top performer. On all completes: 44% vs 33%.

"The rules held. The exceptions bent."

37 vs 24%

PERCEPTION

Managers sure an ambiguous charge was "very likely" an honest mistake · Q11 · n=374

Same facts, more certainty

Most managers leaned toward good faith either way (77% vs 74%). A top performer got it with more conviction, and the gap held at every level of management experience.

"The facts never changed. Only the reputation did."

70 vs 68%

PERCEPTION

Formal warning, discipline or escalation: low vs typical performer · Q14 · n=352

A premium for stars, not a penalty for strugglers

The low performer faced the same recommended outcomes as a typical one. The study registered this test before fielding and reports the null as found.

"Performance moved outcomes in one direction only."

81% · 59%

PERCEPTION

Managers who say policy should apply equally · who say stars get more leniency where they work · Q24, Q25 · n=893

Two Rulebooks

Half of all managers (50%) agree with both statements at once.

"Managers endorse one rulebook and describe a second."

66%

INCIDENCE

Workers and managers who have personally seen a star avoid consequences or a struggler face harsher ones · Q26 · n=2,000

Most people have already seen it happen

The leniency side is reported more often than the harshness side, and a third of respondents (32%) have seen both. Coworkers stayed willing to report a star, but fewer expected equal handling once they did (62% vs 72%).

"Coworkers will raise it. They are less sure it will count."



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The rulebook held. The exceptions bent toward the stars.

Managers were asked to decide one case: an employee submits the same expense twice. Each manager saw one version, and the versions differed only in how much was known and how the employee was described. No manager judged more than one employee, so any gap between versions comes from the description, not from the manager.

49%
supported an exception for a top performer

27%
did so for a typical performer

25%
did so for a low performer

Managers given a confirmed, knowingly submitted duplicate expense · Q15 · PERCEPTION · sensitivity sample n=100 / 105 / 121 (all completes: 44% / 33% / 29%)

Investigation and discipline barely moved. Roughly two in three managers recommended formal warning, discipline or escalation whoever the employee was, and investigation ran at 95% to 96% in every confirmed version. The gap opened in one decision: whether this case, for this person, deserved an exception. Before the facts were settled, managers given a top performer were also half again as likely to be sure the charge was an honest mistake (37% vs 24% "very likely").

The mirror image never appeared. A low performer received the same outcomes as a typical one. What changed was the explanation: 41% of managers deciding a low performer's case pointed to reputation, against 24% who pointed to the incident itself. And managers know the standard they are meant to hold. 81% say policy should apply equally regardless of performance; 59% say high performers get more leniency where they work.

READING THIS REPORT

Every figure names its question, base and label. INCIDENCE means something the respondent has done or seen; PERCEPTION means a judgment or likely action. Experimental results are stated intentions on a hypothetical case and show association with the described performance level, not proof of how any manager acts. Where the sensitivity sample differs materially from all completes, both appear. Methodology and the findings that cut against this report are on page 14.

ONE RULE, TWO READINGS

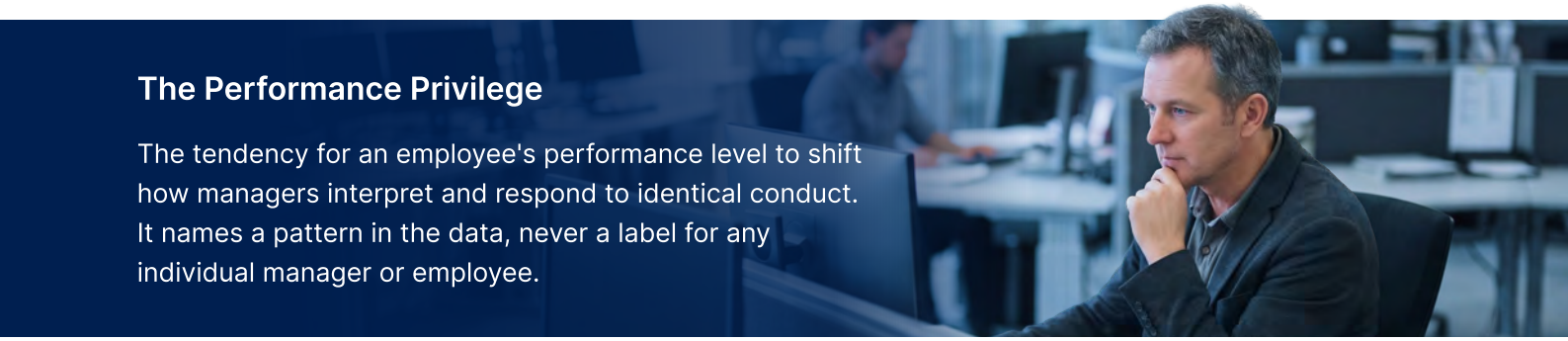
Rule-breaking is common. The question is who gets forgiven for it.

Rule-breaking at work is ordinary. 81% of respondents have seen at least one of six kinds of violation in a current or past workplace. Expense violations, the case used in this study's experiment, sit near the bottom of that list, which makes the scenario a concrete, lower-frequency test: easy to picture, rarely routine.

Violation personally witnessed (select all)	All	Managers	Non-managers
Missed deadlines or failure to deliver agreed work	61%	67%	57%
Disrespecting or mistreating coworkers	43%	43%	42%
Attendance or punctuality violations	37%	46%	31%
Unauthorized personal use of company resources	29%	36%	23%
Bypassing required approvals or procedures	20%	27%	15%
Expense or financial policy violations	**17%**	**25%**	**11%**
None of these	19%	11%	26%

Q4 · INCIDENCE · n=2,000 (managers n=893, non-managers n=1,107) · weighted

Managers report more of almost everything, most sharply expense violations (25% vs 11%), consistent with managers being the people who approve the claims. The standard story says a rule is a rule. This study tested the part of that story nobody audits: whether the same rule reads the same way when the person who broke it is the team's best performer.



The Performance Privilege

The tendency for an employee's performance level to shift how managers interpret and respond to identical conduct. It names a pattern in the data, never a label for any individual manager or employee.

The chapters that follow measure it four ways: in the benefit of the doubt, in the exception, in what managers say drove them, and in what coworkers expect, ending with what workers and managers rank as the fix.

ONE CASE, FIVE VERSIONS

No manager saw more than one employee. That is what makes the gaps readable.

GCheck surveyed 2,000 employed US adults on Pollfish on November 5, 2026, weighted by age, gender and region. 893 supervise at least one direct report (45% weighted). Every respondent was randomly assigned one version of the same case: an employee submits a duplicate expense claim. Only two things vary: how much is known, and how the employee performs.

	TYPICAL PERFORMER	TOP PERFORMER	LOW PERFORMER
NOT YET CLEAR if a mistake	**A** Typical performer · Ambiguous · Managers n=179 · Non-managers n=226	**B** Top performer · Ambiguous · Managers n=195 · Non-managers n=200	Not tested: a low performer was shown only in the confirmed condition
CONFIRMED submitted knowingly	**C** Typical performer · Confirmed · Managers n=173 · Non-managers n=228	**D** Top performer · Confirmed · Managers n=167 · Non-managers n=229	**E** Low performer · Confirmed · Managers n=179 · Non-managers n=224

Managers answered as the decision-maker

Would they investigate, document, discipline or grant an exception, and what drove that choice? (Q11 to Q19)

Non-managers answered as a coworker

Would they report it, and would they expect management to handle it the same way for anyone? (Q9, Q10)



THE SENSITIVITY SAMPLE

32% of managers misread whether their version was ambiguous or confirmed, most often in the ambiguous versions. Following the pre-registered rule, every experimental result was computed twice: on all completes, and on a sensitivity sample that sets aside responses flagged for speeding, straight-lining or a failed comprehension check (524 of 893 managers retained). The sensitivity figure leads a headline only where the two differ materially and its base reaches n=100.

SAME FACTS, MORE CERTAINTY

Before anything was confirmed, the top performer was already presumed innocent

How likely is it this was an honest mistake?

"Very likely"

A · Typical performer 24%

B · Top performer 37%

"Very" or "somewhat likely"

A · Typical performer 74%

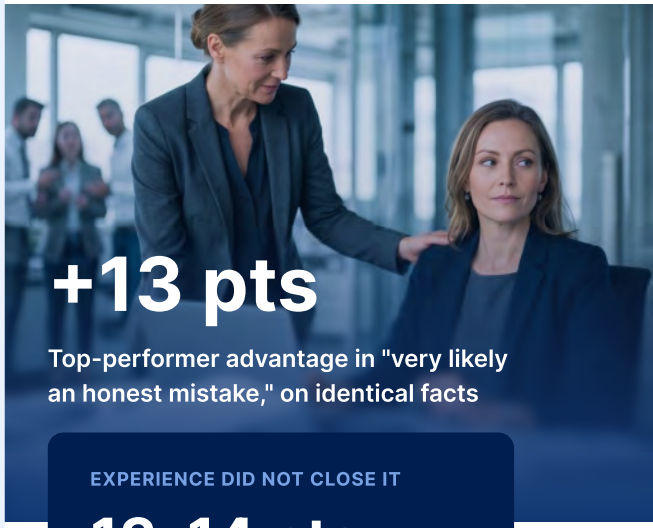
B · Top performer 77%

"Very likely," sensitivity sample (directional)

A · Typical performer 23%

B · Top performer 48%

Q11 · PERCEPTION · managers in the ambiguous versions, n=374 (sensitivity n=198; typical-performer base 97, directional)



+13 pts

Top-performer advantage in "very likely an honest mistake," on identical facts

EXPERIENCE DID NOT CLOSE IT

13–14 pts

The gap held among managers with under 4, 4 to 9, and 10+ years of experience.

Q11 × Q6 · n=102 to 147 per band, directional, age-confounded.



When it was not yet clear whether the duplicate was a mistake, managers given a top performer were far more certain that it was. The facts were identical across both versions; only the description of the employee changed.

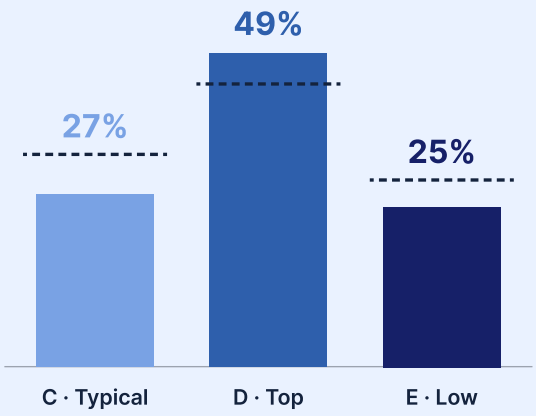
The gap sits in conviction, not direction. Managers extended good faith broadly: three in four leaned toward an honest mistake either way, a difference too small to read as real. A top performer simply got that good faith with more certainty, and in the sensitivity sample the "very likely" gap roughly doubles. Tenure tracks age closely in this sample (average age 36, 43 and 50 across the bands), so the experience result is not read as a pure experience effect.

"The facts never changed between versions. Only the reputation did."

THE HEADLINE FINDING

After a confirmed violation, a top performer was 1.8 times as likely to get an exception

Support an exception to the usual policy



Q15 · PERCEPTION · bars = sensitivity sample n=105 / 100 / 121 · dashed tick = all completes 33% / 44% / 29% (n=173 / 167 / 179)

Once a review confirmed the duplicate was submitted knowingly, managers still investigated and documented almost universally. Performance showed up in one place: the willingness to set the policy aside.

The exception row is the largest, most consistent difference in the study. On all completes the gap is 11 points. In the sensitivity sample it widens to 22, which makes a top performer 1.8 times as likely to be granted an exception for the same knowing violation.

THE GAP GROWS WITH EXPERIENCE

+3 +14 +21 pts

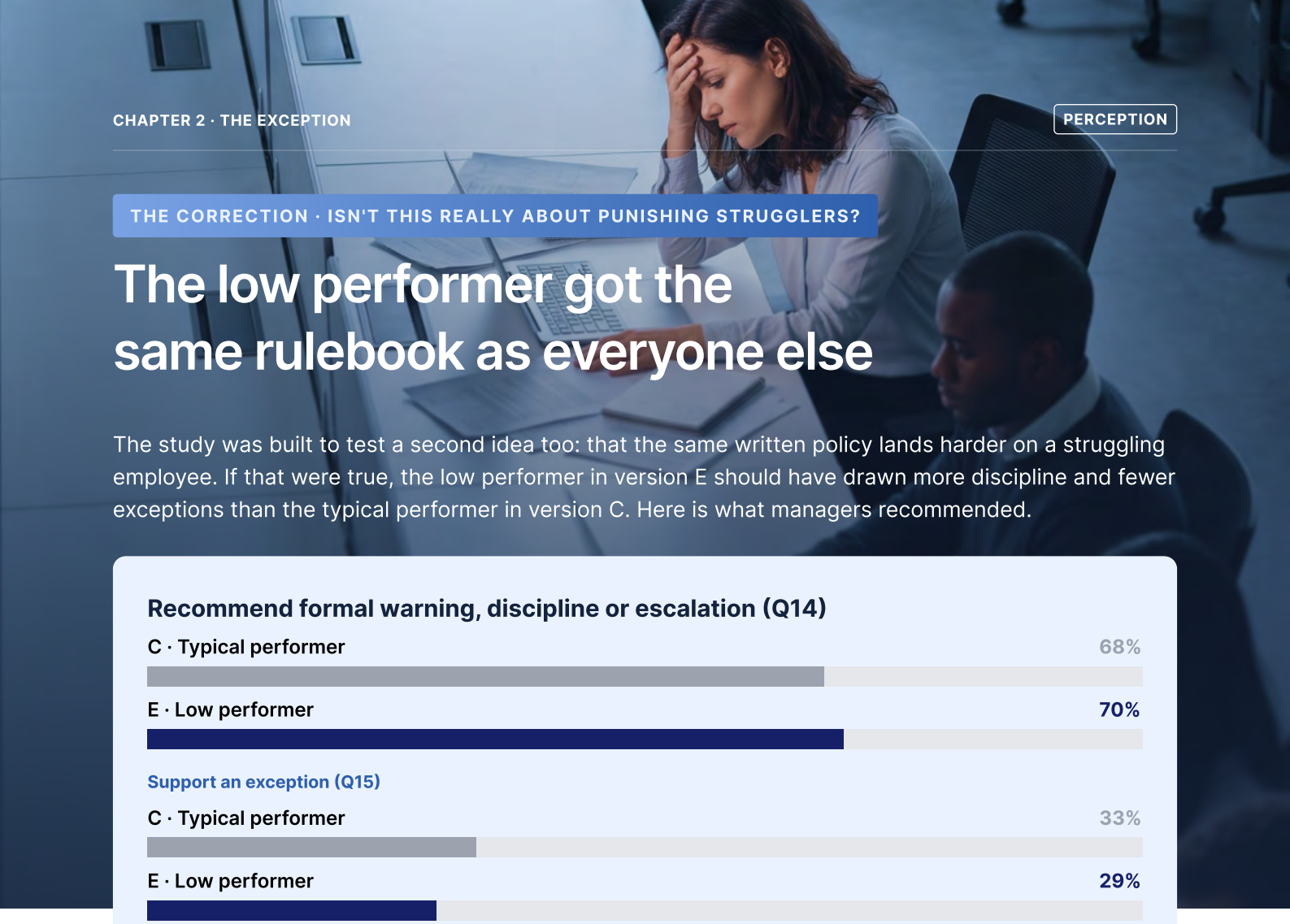
Under 4 · 4 to 9 · 10+ years managing (Q15 × Q6, n=95 to 139 per band, directional, age-confounded). Seasoned managers endorse equal enforcement at the same 81% as newer ones.

Everything else stayed close to even

Manager response to the confirmed violation	Typical (C)	Top (D)	Low (E)
Very or somewhat likely to investigate further (Q12)	96%	96%	95%
Very likely to investigate further (Q12)	62%	65%	71%
Very or somewhat likely to formally document (Q13)	94%	87%	97%
Recommend formal warning, discipline or escalation (Q14)	68%	64%	70%
Support an exception to the usual policy (Q15)	33%	44%	29%
Support an exception, sensitivity sample (Q15)	27%	49%	25%

Q12 to Q15 · PERCEPTION · n=173 / 167 / 179 (sensitivity n=105 / 100 / 121). The documentation gap (87% vs 94%) disappears in the sensitivity sample and is treated as fragile.

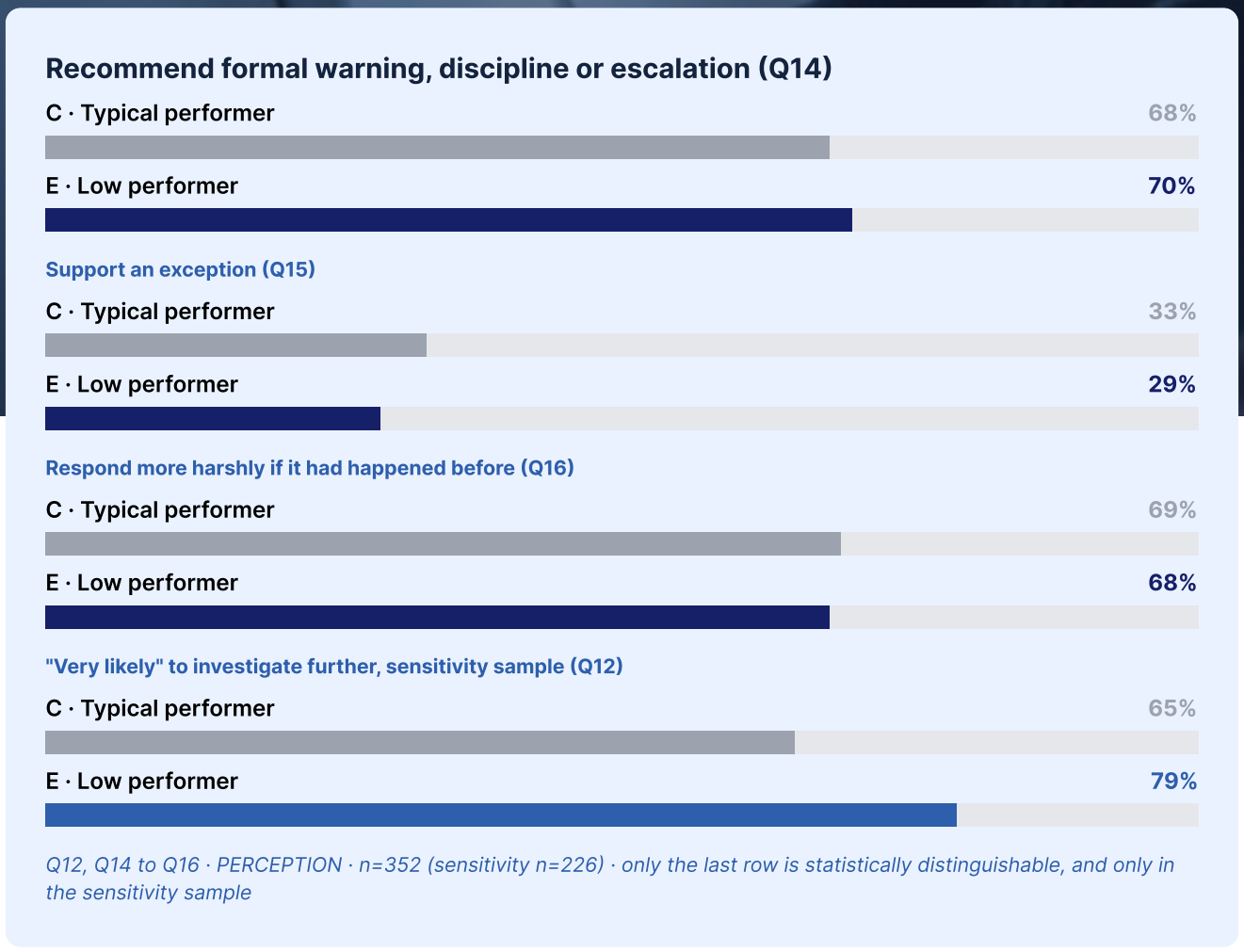
"The rules held. The exceptions bent toward the stars."



THE CORRECTION · ISN'T THIS REALLY ABOUT PUNISHING STRUGGLERS?

The low performer got the same rulebook as everyone else

The study was built to test a second idea too: that the same written policy lands harder on a struggling employee. If that were true, the low performer in version E should have drawn more discipline and fewer exceptions than the typical performer in version C. Here is what managers recommended.



Q12, Q14 to Q16 · PERCEPTION · n=352 (sensitivity n=226) · only the last row is statistically distinguishable, and only in the sensitivity sample

None of the outcome differences is distinguishable from chance. The single hint of extra scrutiny is intensity: more managers would be "very likely" to dig further into a low performer's claim, a gap that reaches significance only once flagged responses are set aside.

The pre-registration committed to reporting this outcome plainly, without hunting for a smaller effect to replace it. The finding stands as registered: a premium for top performers, not a penalty for low performers.

"Performance moved outcomes in one direction only."

IN MANAGERS' OWN WORDS

Leniency is explained through trust more than through fear of losing a star

Managers who decided the confirmed top-performer and low-performer cases were each asked for the main factor behind their decision, from lists written for each direction. No single reason reached a majority in either case.

Top performer (D) · main factor

Seriousness of the issue	19%
Written policy should decide	17%
Strong track record of reliability	15%
Not enough information	10%
Concern about losing a valuable employee	10%
Belief the employee acted in good faith	8%
Trust in the employee's judgment	8%
Replacement would be difficult or costly	6%
Team work would be disrupted	5%

Q17 · PERCEPTION · n=167

Low performer (E) · main factor

Seriousness of the issue	24%
Performance history influenced my judgment	22%
Concern about a broader pattern	20%
Written policy should decide	19%
Not enough information	10%
Do not fully trust the employee's account	6%

Q18 · PERCEPTION · n=179

30% vs 21%

Trust-based vs retention-based reasons, top performer

41% vs 24%

Reputation vs the incident itself, low performer

78%

Say overall performance influenced their decision a moderate amount or a great deal (Q19, n=346)

For the top performer, leniency is explained more often through trust than through fear of losing someone, though one in five managers names retention directly. For the low performer, reputation outweighed the incident, and that holds in the sensitivity sample (44% vs 33%).

This is the study's quiet tension. Managers deciding a low performer's case say reputation shaped their judgment, yet their recommended outcomes match a typical performer's.



"Reputation shows up in how a decision is explained before it shows up in the decision."

THE TRUST GRADIENT

Trust follows performance. Oversight mostly does not.

Before any violation enters the picture, managers already trust their best people far more than the rest. Day-to-day review and discretion do not follow that slope.



	HIGHEST PERFORMER	TYPICAL	LOWEST PERFORMER
Trust their judgment A great deal or quite a bit · Q20 · n=881 to 888	83%	61%	32%
Review work before approving Always or often · Q21 · n=877 to 883	69%	69%	77%
Give discretion over how work is done A great deal or quite a bit · Q23 · n=753 to 851	62%	50%	52%

Q20, Q21, Q23 · PERCEPTION · managers, excluding not applicable · 122 managers left the lowest-performer discretion row blank

The trust gap is the one a manager carries into an ambiguous case, and it matches where the experiment found its effect: certainty that a top performer meant no harm. Review runs nearly flat, and only the lowest performer is reviewed somewhat more. Discretion drops from the highest to the typical performer, then stops falling.

36% vs 22%

Managers who review their top performer more closely than peers vs less closely (Q22 · n=893)

Because these questions followed the scenario, results were checked by version. The trust slope held in all five; review and discretion moved more from version to version.

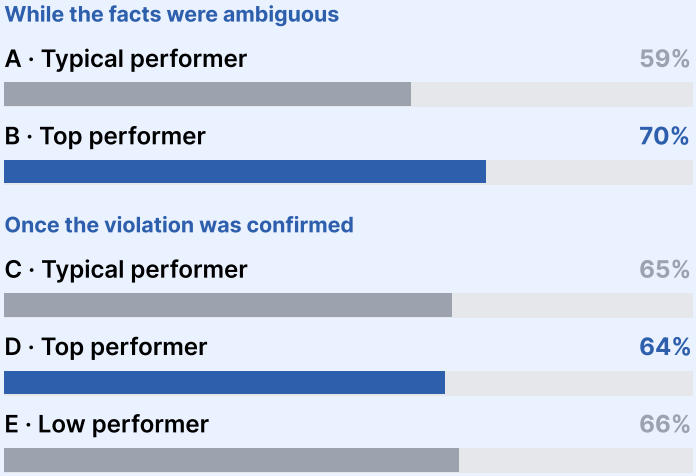
"Managers do not watch their stars less. They trust them more."

WILLING TO SPEAK, UNSURE IT WILL MATTER

Coworkers will report a star. Fewer expect it to be handled the same way.

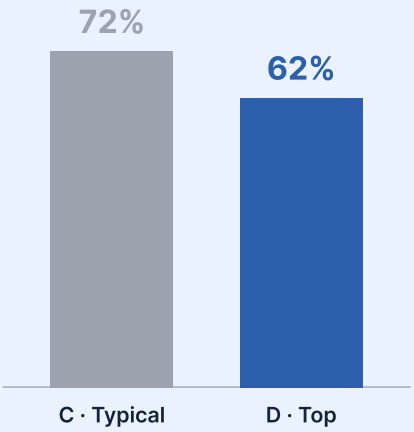
Non-managers read the same five versions as a coworker who noticed the duplicate. They did not hold back on top performers: 65% said they were very or somewhat likely to report it or raise it with a manager across all five versions (Q9, n=1,107).

Would report it or raise it with a manager



Q9 · PERCEPTION · ambiguous n=426, confirmed n=681 · very or somewhat likely

Expect management to handle it the same way for anyone



Q10 · PERCEPTION · confirmed versions C and D, n=457

The registered expectation, that coworkers would be less willing to report a star, came back reversed in the ambiguous versions and null in the confirmed ones. What changed was confidence in the outcome. 38% of coworkers reading the confirmed top-performer version did not say they expected equal handling.

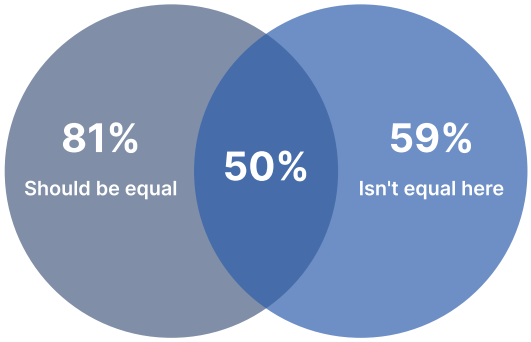
That gap matters because unreported problems are already the norm. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission found that roughly three in four people who experience workplace harassment never report it, most often out of fear of disbelief, inaction or retaliation (EEOC, 2016). A coworker who doubts the outcome has one more reason to stay quiet next time.

"Coworkers will raise it. They are less sure it will count."

WHAT MANAGERS BELIEVE, WHAT THEY DESCRIBE

Managers endorse one rulebook and describe a second

Ask managers what fair enforcement looks like and they agree almost unanimously. 81% agree company policy should be enforced the same way regardless of performance. 59% agree that at their own organization, high performers receive more leniency when they break a rule; 21% disagree. Half of all managers (50%) agree with both.



81%
Policy should apply equally (Q24)

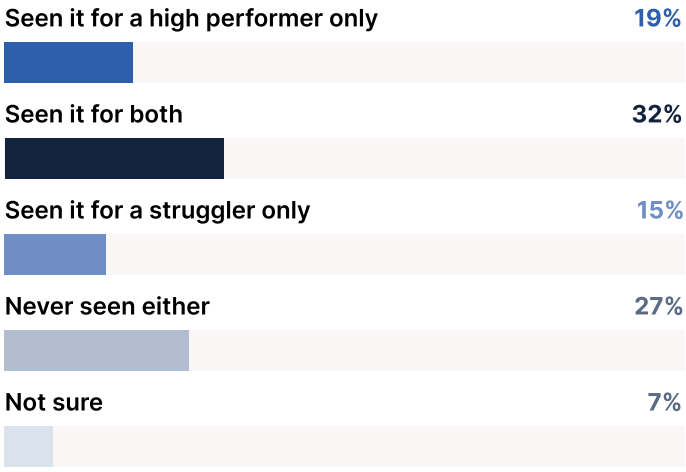
59%
Stars get more leniency here (Q25)

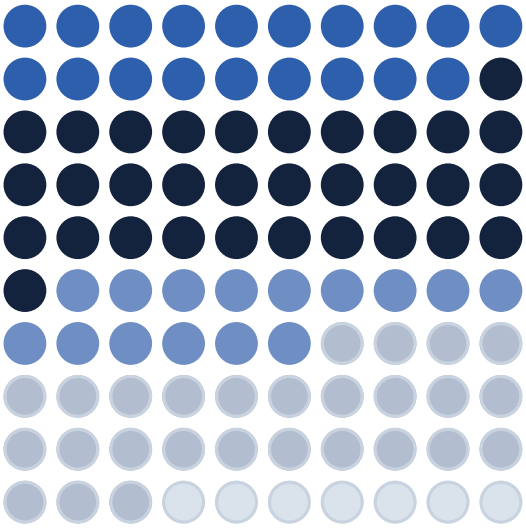
50%
Agree with both

Q24, Q25 · PERCEPTION · managers n=893

The admission is highest among managers at organizations of 50 to 249 employees (66%) and lowest under 50 employees (49%) (Q25 × Q3 · n=181 to 296 per size band).

Two in three have seen the second rulebook at work





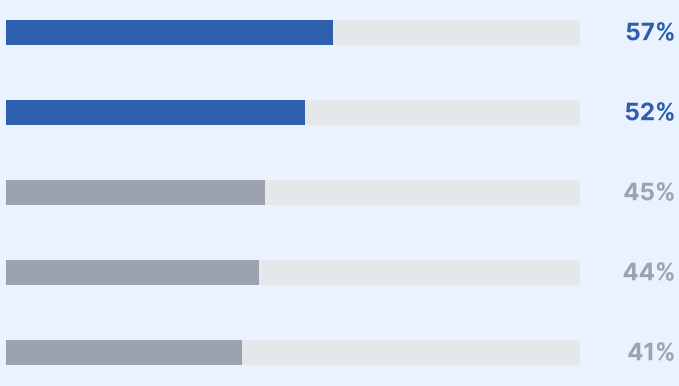
Q26 · INCIDENCE · n=2,000 · managers 23 / 34 / 19 / 20 / 4, non-managers 15 / 30 / 11 / 34 / 9

Leniency is reported more often than harshness. That lived experience runs ahead of the experiment, which found a premium for stars but no penalty for strugglers in stated decisions. Real cases are rarely as clear-cut as one duplicate expense, and perceived unfairness is easy to remember.

CONSISTENCY, NOT SURVEILLANCE

The fix sits in one decision: the exception

What would most help ensure consistent treatment regardless of performance?



Q27 · PERCEPTION · n=2,000, multi-select · managers / non-managers: criteria 54 / 59 · safe channel 46 / 57 · training 50 / 40 · documentation 47 / 41 · leadership 36 / 45

Nothing on this list asks for gentler standards or closer watching. Managers lean toward training and documentation; non-managers lean toward a safe channel and leadership example. Read against the experiment, the most direct lever is the documentation row: a written reason for every exception, applied in both directions, puts a record behind the one decision where performance measurably moved the outcome. SHRM's culture research places the responsibility where respondents do: 76% of employees say their manager sets the culture of their workplace (SHRM, 2019).

FOUR PRACTICE CHANGES FOR HR AND PEOPLE LEADERS

1. Require a written rationale, reviewed outside the reporting line, for any exception to a conduct or expense policy.
2. Record the same incident details for every employee, whatever their rating, so comparisons rest on facts.
3. Give coworkers a channel to raise inconsistent treatment, and close the loop with them.
4. Train managers to name what is driving a decision, since 41% deciding a low performer's case cited reputation over the incident.

An exception granted without a written reason leaves the next person with the same conduct and a weaker record on the other side of that comparison, the kind of inconsistency comparator evidence in employment disputes turns on. This report describes that risk category; it is not legal advice.

"Workers are not asking for softer rules. They are asking for one rulebook."

METHODOLOGY AND HONESTY NOTES

How the numbers were made

Design element	Specification
Sample	2,000 employed US adults (1,620 full-time, 380 part-time) · Pollfish · fielded November 5, 2026 · weighted by age, gender and region · non-probability opt-in panel
Design	Between-subjects randomized experiment, five versions (A to E) · managers n=893 answered as decision-maker · non-managers n=1,107 answered as coworker · no role reweighting
Sensitivity sample	Flags: under 90 sec (managers) or 45 sec (non-managers), identical trust and review matrices, or failed comprehension check · 369 managers and 62 non-managers flagged · 524 managers retained
Question IDs	All IDs reference the fielded Pollfish instrument (survey 395606961)
Labels	Every figure carries question ID, base n, and INCIDENCE or PERCEPTION
Discipline	No composite scores or indexes · matrix rows and multi-selects reported individually · race and ethnicity collected for description only · n<100 directional, n<30 not reported
Deviations	Plan assumed two surveys of 750 with a manager quota; fielded as one survey of 2,000 at the natural manager share · coworkers saw five versions instead of three · no registered direction changed

Findings that cut the other way

Most managers acted the same way whoever the employee was: investigation stayed at 95% to 96% and formal discipline within 64% to 70% (Q12, Q14 · n=519). Seriousness of the issue was the most cited reason in both directions (19% and 24%). Repeat behavior mattered more than reputation: 67% would respond more harshly to a second incident, at similar rates for every performer (Q16 · n=519). Top performers are not reviewed less day to day (69% vs 69%, Q21). 27% of respondents have never witnessed unequal treatment, and 7% are unsure (Q26). About a third of managers misread the scenario; for the exception and benefit-of-the-doubt findings, setting them aside makes the effect larger, not smaller.

Framing disciplines

Every experimental measure is a stated intention in response to a hypothetical case. People tend to understate behavior that reflects unevenly on their own fairness, so the measured gaps are best read as a floor. Differences between versions are reported as association with the described performance level, not proof of how any manager acts. The named terms (The Performance Privilege, The Performance Privilege Gap, The Exception, Two Rulebooks) describe patterns in the data, never individuals, and appear as the name of no statistic. No monitoring or surveillance remedy appears anywhere in this report. The full questionnaire and dataset documentation are available on request.



ABOUT THIS REPORT

About

GCheck | Behind Better Teams

GCheck is a modern, hire-to-retire screening platform dedicated to Compliance for Good®, helping organizations hire and retain with speed, accuracy and fairness. We operate across the entire employee lifecycle, delivering background checks, identity verification, drug testing, employment and professional verifications, continuous monitoring, and compliance management through one unified platform.

References

GCheck. (2026). The Performance Privilege [Proprietary survey of 2,000 U.S. employed adults]. https://gcheck.com/whitepapers/performance-privilege-report

GCheck. (2026). The Consequence Gap [Proprietary survey of 1,500 U.S. adults employed full-time]. https://gcheck.com/whitepapers/consequence-gap-report

GCheck. (2026). The 2026 Trust in Hiring Report [Proprietary survey of 1,500 U.S. adults]. https://gcheck.com/whitepapers/trust-in-hiring-report

Society for Human Resource Management. (2019, September 25). SHRM reports toxic workplace cultures cost billions [Press release]. https://www.shrm.org/about/press-room/shrm-reports-toxic-workplace-cultures-cost-billions

U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. (2016). Select Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace: Report of co-chairs Chai R. Feldblum and Victoria A. Lipnic. https://www.eeoc.gov/select-task-force-study-harassment-workplace-report-co-chairs-chai-r-feldblum-victoria-lipnic