

BIAS INTERRUPTERS

*small steps
big change*

Tools for Meetings

THE CHALLENGE

Having expertise increases men’s influence—but decreases women’s.¹ This is just one way subtle biases play out in meetings.

Research also shows that men interrupt women, more than vice versa.² And across industries, women in our studies consistently report that someone has gotten the credit for an idea they originally posed. In our survey of architects, half of women of color and white women reported having their ideas stolen, compared to less than a third of white men and men of color. Multiracial women reported an even worse experience: Almost two-thirds reported that they had an idea stolen.³

If companies don’t interrupt bias playing out in meetings, they may lose the talent and insight they pay for—or even encounter safety risks. We heard from one scientist in a workplace that handled dangerous materials that she was sharply criticized as aggressive when she brought up a flaw in a male colleague’s analysis. After that, she took to “bringing in baked goods and being agreeable” — but at what cost?

In addition, bias within in-person meetings may also translate to and be exacerbated by virtual meetings.⁴

THE SOLUTION

1. *Identify the Source of Bias*

Options for finding out whether you have a problem are listed from least to most time-consuming.

1. **Employ new technologies:** GenderEQ is an app that analyzes the ratio of men and women’s speaking time
2. **Use our [free 2-minute downloadable survey](#)** to assess bias issues.
3. **Appoint a Bias Interrupter** to gather metrics over the course of several meetings. Metrics to gather:
 - **Floor Time:** Who mostly speaks at meetings? Is it representative of who attends?
 - **Interruptions:** Is there a culture of interrupting in your meetings? If so, is there a demographic pattern in who does the interrupting and who gets interrupted?
 - **Stolen Idea:** Research shows that women and people of color report that others get credit for ideas they originally offered much more than white men do.⁵ Keep track of who gets credit for ideas offered and who originated them.
 - **Attendees:** Are the right people getting invited? Be sure everyone who has a part to play is at the meeting.
 - **Ideas:** Whose contributions get lauded or implemented?
 - **Office housework:** Track who takes the notes, who keeps the minutes, who gets coffee, and other office housework tasks.
 - **Meeting scheduling:** Are meetings scheduled at times or at locations that make it difficult or impossible for parents and caregivers to attend?

2. Implement Bias Interrupters

Because every organization is different, not all interrupters will be relevant. Consider this a menu. To better understand the research and rationale behind the suggested bias interrupters, read our **Identifying Bias in Meetings Guide** which summarizes numerous studies and encourage other team members to read it too.

- **Rotate office housework tasks.** Women are more likely to be asked to do the “office housework” tasks for meetings: taking notes, scheduling the conference rooms, ordering lunch/snacks, cleaning up afterwards. If admins are available to do these tasks, use them. If not, don’t ask for volunteers. Instead, figure out a fair way to spread the housework tasks evenly by rotating based on arbitrary criteria (birthday, astrological sign, seniority, etc.) For more bias interrupters about office housework, see **Bias Interrupters for Managers: Tools for Assignments**.
- **Mind the “stolen idea.”** Make sure people get credit for ideas they offered. When you see ideas get stolen, you can say: “Great point, Eric, I’ve been thinking about that ever since Pam first said it. Pam, what’s the next step?” If the person doesn’t get it, take them aside later in private.
- **Don’t give interrupters free reign.** If a few people are dominating the conversation, address it directly. A calm, “Please let her finish her point” should send the message to most. If more is needed, take them aside and explain that your workplace employs a broad range of people because you need to hear a broad range of viewpoints. Some may not even realize they’re frequent interrupters. Create and enforce an overall policy for interruptions. One option is a no-interruptions policy, where you make it clear that interruptions are not to be tolerated, and ding people when they interrupt. A gentler policy is to keep track of who is continually interrupting and getting interrupted, and talk about the problem.
- **Schedule meetings appropriately.** Schedule meetings in the office, not at the golf course. For an off-site, schedule lunch or afternoon coffee. Overall, stick to working hours and professional locations for work meetings.
- **Do your best to not schedule meetings at drop-off or pick-up time.** Sure, an early meeting may be unavoidable at times. But on the whole, if you respect people’s non-work obligations (driving their kids to school, relieving their parent’s elder caregiver at the end of the day or taking their “furry children” (pets) for a walk), they will be more committed in the long-run. Be mindful of time zones as well.
- **Make a seat for everyone at the table.** When there is an inner- and outer-circle of chairs it can create hierarchy.⁶ Pay attention: do all the men sit in the inner circle and the women sit in the outer circle, or is race playing a role? If this happens routinely, have everyone trade places with the person in front of them, or better yet, rearrange chairs so there is only one circle.
- **Signal everyone’s role.** Let your team know what everyone in the meeting brings to the table.⁷ “Monique has five years of event planning experience and I’m excited to have her on this project,” or “Sam managed a similar portfolio last spring and we’d like him to run point with the client.” When people know the reason behind everyone’s inclusion on the project, and their role, it’s much easier to have productive and inclusive conversations about the tasks at hand — people are more likely to listen to their ideas and respect their air-time. If you’re not sure everyone with influence understands why you’ve tapped someone into a meeting, be sure to mention it explicitly beforehand.
- **Use gender neutral terms.** When addressing a diverse group, it is best to not use gendered terms such as “ladies and gentleman” or “you guys.” Address a diverse group such as “you all,” “folks,” “individuals,” “people” and so forth. Encourage the use of pronouns when introducing each other.
- **Establish ground rules for diverse groups.** When meetings are diverse, people may fail to speak up for fear of not being politically correct. To combat this, simply state at the beginning of the meeting that because people can sometimes get offended, everyone should try their best to speak in a way

that's "politically correct" (aka respectful). Research shows that this simple statement can decrease uncertainty and increase creativity from participants.⁸

- **Ask people to speak-up and encourage risk takers.** Women and people of color often face social pressure to speak in a tentative, deferential manner and decades of research have shown that women face social pressures to hedge and use softeners. Additionally, both women and people of color may face double-standards for speaking in a direct and assertive manner.⁹ If someone isn't speaking up, ask them to weigh in.¹⁰ "Reagan, you have experience here, what are we missing?" This strategy can also help first-generation professionals and introverts feel included. It's also tough to speak up against a majority opinion — especially for someone who's not in the majority group.¹¹ Research shows that people are more likely to voice minority opinions when at least one other person expresses a minority opinion — even if the minority opinions don't agree with each other.¹² Some ways to make it easier to voice minority opinions:
 - State explicitly at the beginning of meetings that you *want* to hear devil's advocate ideas.
 - Support people who diverge from the majority. If someone starts to voice an opinion and senses that nobody wants to hear it, they will likely pipe down. If you see this happening, say "Let's hear this idea out."
- **Send the meeting agenda in advance or forewarn people that you plan to call on them.** Introverts and anyone who grew up with a modesty mandate may be more reluctant to speak on the fly or speak up at all. Sending the agenda or giving them a heads-up that you plan to call on them will give them a chance to jot down their thoughts in advance.

3. *Virtual Meetings:*

Bias within in-person meetings may also translate to and be exacerbated by virtual meetings.¹³ However, if handled properly, virtual meetings can mitigate many of the patterns of bias mentioned above. After all, everyone has a "seat at the table" on Zoom. Here are some best practices to keep in mind to reduce bias and increase participation:

- **Go all-virtual or all-in person.** Having some team members meet in-person while remote workers dial-in can discourage participation from remote workers and give on-site workers an unfair advantage. To avoid this, schedule meetings for either all in-person or all-remote. When this isn't possible, create a buddy/avatar system; for every remote worker, assign an in-person worker who holds space for them during the meeting.¹⁴ The in-person buddy can help the remote employee jump into the conversation.
- **Chronic interrupters? Have people "raise their hand."** Assign one person to lead the meeting and call on people as they use the "raise hand" function to minimize interruptions and equalize speaking turns.
- **Can't get a word in? Encourage people to use the chat box.** Whereas in in-person meetings, it may be difficult for some people to get a word in edgewise, in virtual meetings the chat box allows anyone to participate in real-time.
- **Make cameras-on optional.** Allowing people to make their own choices about being on camera will not only help with Zoom fatigue, but also allow employees a sense of privacy if they do not have private office spaces in their homes. Virtual backgrounds are another option.
- **Make meetings accessible and inclusive.** Review and encourage your team to read this list of best practices for selecting a meeting platform and settings that can enable individuals with visual, hearing or mobility issues to participate fully in meetings.¹⁵
- **Normalize adding pronouns to usernames.** Do not assume an individual's gender based off their name or appearance, encourage (or require) employees to list pronouns on their screen handles.¹⁶

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- ⁹ For representative studies, see Haselhuhn & Kray, 2012; Heilman & Taylor, 1981; Livingston, Rosette, & Washington, 2012; Berdahl & Min, 2012; Williams et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2018. A thorough bibliography of this body of research is available in *Climate Control: Gender & Racial Bias in Engineering*, Williams et al., 2016, available at worklifelaw.org
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- ¹⁵ Essential Accessibility. (2021). How to Make Virtual Meetings Accessible. Retrieved from: <https://www.essentialaccessibility.com/blog/how-to-make-virtual-meetings-accessible>
- ¹⁶ For instructions on adding pronouns to your Zoom profile, visit: <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/4402698027533-Adding-and-sharing-your-pronouns>.

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BIAS INTERRUPTERS FOR MEETINGS *Identifying Bias in Meetings Guide*

The five patterns below describe *tendencies not absolutes*. Here's what to watch out for:

Prove-It-Again! ("PIA") — Groups stereotyped as less competent often have to prove themselves over and over. "PIA groups" include women, people of color, individuals with disabilities,¹ older employees,² members of the LGBTQIA+ community³ and first-generation professionals.⁴

1. **The Stolen Idea.** Ideas offered by PIA groups are likely to be overlooked or credited to others⁵

2. **PIA groups get horns; others a halo.** Horns = one weakness generalized into an overall negative rating. Halo = one strength generalized into a global positive rating. If a majority man is great at one aspect of his job, his opinions might hold more weight in meetings about other topics as well – even more than an expert from a historically excluded group. In addition, mistakes by one PIA group member may reinforce negative group stereotypes.⁶

3. **Check the stereotype.** Stereotypes can drive perception about who's contributing and how. We heard from one African-American woman who was told "you dominated that discussion" after barely speaking in a meeting.⁷

Tightrope — A narrower range of workplace behavior often is accepted from women⁸, people of color⁹, and the LGBTQIA+ community.¹⁰ First-generation professionals and modest or introverted men can face Tightrope problems, too.

1. **Is she an expert, or just bossy?** Men with expertise are typically listened to more, while women with expertise are listened to less.¹¹

2. **Direct and assertive—or angry and abrasive?** Behavior praised in white men – being direct, competitive, and assertive, may be seen as inappropriate in others, and seen as "tactless," "selfish," "difficult" and "abrasive." Anger that's accepted from majority men may be seen as out of line or even threatening in women or people of color.¹²

3. **Dutiful daughter or office mom?** Women are often pushed into one of two roles: the "dutiful daughter" who aligns with a powerful man, but doesn't get to challenge his perspective, or the "office mom" who carries the emotional labor of the organization rather than pursuing career-enhancing assignments.¹³

4. **Leader or worker bee?** Women and people of color face pressure to be "worker bees" who work hard and are undemanding... but if they comply, they lack "leadership potential."¹⁴

5. **Office housework vs glamour work.** Women and people of color report less access to career-enhancing opportunities ("glamour work") and women of all races report more "office housework."¹⁵

6. **Modesty mandate.** Some groups are brought up with a modesty mandate. Women, people of Asian descent, immigrants and first-generation professionals

Common Office Housework Tasks in Meetings

- Scheduling the meeting.
- Booking the space.
- Putting together the agenda.
- Ordering refreshments or other supplies ahead of time.
- Making sure everyone shows up.
- Getting the conference line to work.
- Setting up the space – food, drinks, paperwork, projectors, chairs, tables, etc.
- Taking notes.
- Picking up printing – especially in the middle of the meeting.
- Cleaning up the space afterwards.
- Sending out follow-up e-mails.
- Collecting feedback for the next meeting.

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may be expected to be mild-mannered team players. Those who are “helpful” are coded as lacking ambition.¹⁶

7. LGBTQIA+ employees may be stereotyped as “too feminine,” “too masculine,” or just “too gay.”¹⁷ These kinds of judgement signal illegal discrimination under federal and state law.

8. Virtual Setting: Given stereotypes placed on women, any site of untidiness such as unwashed dishes, or dirty laundry in the background may open the opportunity for them to be negatively judged.¹⁸

9. Technical Difficulties: Women are viewed as less competent if they are experiencing difficulties.¹⁹

The Parental Wall can affect parents of all genders—as well as employees without children.

- 1. What time and place are meetings held?** Stick to working hours and professional locations for work meetings. Not at the golf course on a weekend.
- 2. “Pregnancy brain.”** Mothers are stereotyped as less competent and committed, are held to higher performance and punctuality standards.²⁰
- 3. In virtual meetings,** parents who have to step aside to attend to their child may be seen as less committed to the job.²¹
- 4. “No life.”** Employees without children may face the assumption that they can always pick up the slack because they have “no life.” Everyone has a life.²²

Tug of War — Sometimes bias creates conflict within historically excluded groups.²³ This can further undercut group dynamics in meetings.

- 1. Tokenism.** If people feel there’s only one slot per group for a prized position, group members may be pitted against each other to get it.²⁴
- 2. Strategic distancing and the loyalty tax.** People from historically excluded groups may feel that, to get ahead, they need to distance themselves from others of their group, or align with the majority against their own group.²⁵
- 3. Passthroughs. PIA:** People from historically excluded groups may hold members of their own groups to higher standards because “That’s what it takes to succeed here.” **Tightrope:** Women or LGBTQIA+ employees may fault each other for being too masculine—or too feminine. People of color may fault each other for being “too white”—or not “white” enough.²⁶ **Parental wall:** Parents may fault each other for handling parenthood the wrong way—for taking too much time off or too little.²⁷

Racial Stereotypes — People of Asian descent are often stereotyped as passive and lacking in social skills; Black people as angry or too aggressive; Latino/a people as hotheaded or emotional.²⁸

Nine Powerful Bias Interrupters

1. Acknowledge who originated the idea when you build on it.
2. Ask people to speak if you aren’t hearing their voices.
3. If you see some groups getting persistently excluded from meetings off-site – mix it up.
4. Make sure parents are not being left out due to meeting times.
5. Pay attention to who is doing the office housework. Keep track.
6. Make an effort to listen to ideas outside the majority consensus.
7. Ensure all seats are in one circle or rotate seats.
8. Be sure everyone involved is invited to the meeting.
9. Circulate the agenda in advance and offer an opportunity to give comments after the meeting is over. (This helps introverts and modesty-mandate groups.)

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BIAS INTERRUPTERS *small steps big change*

BIAS INTERRUPTERS FOR MEETINGS

Survey

Instructions:

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with each of the following statements using the scale presented for each question.

Indicate the extent to which you agree/disagree.

	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Somewhat Disagree	4 Somewhat Agree	5 Agree	6 Strongly Agree
1. I am interrupted at meetings more than my colleagues.						
2. In meetings, other people get credit for ideas I originally offered.						
3. My suggestions or ideas are respected as much as my colleagues'.						
4. People expect me to be passive and quiet.						
5. I get pushback when I behave assertively in meetings.						
6. I am frequently left out of meetings I should be invited to.						
7. Meetings often take place at locations or during times I cannot attend.						
8. Compared to others, I am often asked to break away from the focus of the meeting to handle support or technical tasks. (Ex. Picking up printing or refilling coffee.)						
9. My ideas are often welcomed and implemented.						
10. I am usually the one arranging meetings, taking notes, and e-mailing colleagues reminders. Skip this question if these duties are part of your job description.						

[**BIAS INTERRUPTERS**] *small steps big change*

BIAS INTERRUPTERS FOR MEETINGS

Survey

How Do I Use This Survey?

1. **Circulate this short survey to your team or use it as a self-diagnostic.**
2. **For Self-Evaluations:** Average your responses – the higher your score, the more bias you’re facing. Go back and visit the questions where you cited the most bias. Can you think of specific ways this plays out in your work environment? What tips from our toolkit address your challenges? Don’t forget to reverse-code questions 3 and 9 when you’re calculating, meaning that lower scores indicate more bias. 1=6, 2=5, etc.

For Group Evaluations: Average the responses of each participant and analyze the results for demographic differences: do certain groups of people feel that meetings are fair while other groups disagree? This may be an indicator of bias playing out in your meetings. Be sure to look at each question’s average too. Is there a category that shows higher bias than others? Start there. Don’t forget to reverse-code questions 3 and 9 when you’re calculating, meaning that lower scores indicate more bias. 1=6, 2=5, etc.

3. **Help us improve this tool: e-mail us at feedback@biasinterrupters.org**