

[BIAS INTERRUPTERS] *small steps big change*

BIAS INTERRUPTERS FOR MANAGERS

Tools for Assignments

THE CHALLENGE

Every workplace has high-profile assignments that are career-enhancing (“glamour work”) and low-profile assignments that are beneficial to the organization but not the individual’s career, in some organizations diversity committee work may fall into this category. Research shows that women do more “office housework”¹ than men.² This includes literal housework (ordering lunch), administrative work (scheduling a time to meet), and emotion work (“she’s upset; comfort her”). Professionals of color (both men and women) also report less access to desirable assignments than white men do.³

- **Glamour work.** More than 80% of white men, but only 53% of women of color, 59% of white women, and 63% of men of color, reported the same access to desirable assignments as their colleagues.⁴
- **Office housework.** Almost 50% of white women and 43% of women of color reported that at work they more often play administrative roles such as taking notes for a meeting compared to their colleagues. Only 26% of white men and 20% of men of color reported this.⁵

Diversity at the top can only occur when diverse employees at all levels of the organization have access to assignments that let them take risks and develop new skills. If the glamour work and the office housework aren’t distributed evenly, you won’t be tapping into the full potential of your workforce. Most workplaces that use an informal “hey, you!” assignment system end up distributing assignments based on factors other than experience and talent. If women and people of color keep getting stuck with the same low-profile assignments, they will be more likely to be dissatisfied and search for opportunities elsewhere.⁶

THE SOLUTION

Fair allocation of the glamour work and the office housework are two separate problems. Some organizations will want to solve the office housework problem before tackling the glamour work; others will want to address both problems simultaneously.

1. **Identify and Track**

The first step is to find out if, and where, you have a problem. Find out:

- Distribute the **Office Housework Survey** to your team to find out who is doing the office housework and how much of their time it takes up.
- Use our **Assignment Typology Guide** to gather further metrics on what assignments fall into your department’s office housework and glamour work.

2. **Implement Bias Interrupters for Office Housework**

- **Establish a rotation.** A rotation is also helpful for many administrative tasks (e.g. taking notes, scheduling meetings). Rotating housework tasks like ordering lunch and planning parties is also an option if admins are unavailable. **Don’t ask for volunteers.** Women are more likely to volunteer because they are under subtle but powerful pressures to do so.⁷

- **Hold everyone equally accountable.** “I give it to women because they do it well and the men don’t,” is a common sentiment. This dynamic reflects an environment in which men suffer few consequences for doing a poor job on office housework, but women who do a poor job are seen as “prima donnas” or “not team players.” Hold men and women equally accountable for carrying out all assignments properly.

3. Implement Bias Interrupters for Glamour Work

- **Avoid mixed messages.** If your organization values such things as mentoring and committee work (like serving on the Diversity Initiative), make sure these things are valued when the time comes for promotions and raises. Sometimes organizations say they highly value this kind of work—but they don’t. Mixed messages of this kind will negatively affect women and people of color.
- **Provide a bounceback.** If you have individual assigners whose glamour work allocations is lopsided, hold a meeting to bring the problem to their attention. Work with them to figure out if either, 1) the available pool for glamour work assignments is diverse but is not being tapped fully or whether 2) only a few people have the requisite skills for glamour work assignments. Read our **Responses to Common Pushback** and **Identifying Bias in Assignments Guide** before the bounceback meeting to prepare.

If a diverse pool has the requisite skills...

- **Implement a rotation.** Have the supervisor set up a rotation to ensure fair access to plum assignments.
- **Formalize the pool and institute accountability.** Write down the list of people with the requisite skills and make it visible to the supervisor. Sometimes just being reminded of the pool can help. Have the supervisor track their allocation of glamour work going forward to measure progress. Research shows that accountability matters.⁸

If the pool is not diverse...

- **Re-visit your assumption** that only one (or very few) employees can handle this assignment: is that true or is the supervisor in question just more comfortable working with those few people?
- **Analyze how the pool was assembled.** Does the supervisor allocate the glamour work by relying on self-promotion or volunteers? If so, that will often disadvantage women and people of color. Shift to more objective measures to create the pool based on skills and qualifications.

*If the above aren’t relevant or don’t solve your problem, then it’s time to **expand the pool**:*

- **Development plan.** Identify what skills or competencies an employee needs to be eligible for the high-profile assignments work and develop a plan to help the employee develop the requisite skills.
- **Leverage existing HR policies.** If your organization uses a competency-based system, or has a Talent Development Committee or equivalent, that’s a resource to help develop competencies so that career-enhancing assignments can be allocated fairly more fairly.
- **Shadowing and mentoring.** Have a more-junior person shadow a more-experienced person during the high-profile assignment. Establish a mentoring program to help a broader range of junior people gain access to valued skills.

If you can’t expand your pool, re-frame the assignment so that more people could participate in it. Could you break up the assignment into discrete pieces so more people get the experiences they need?

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- ¹ Williams, J. C., & Dempsey, R. W. (2014). What works for women at work: Four patterns working women should know. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- ² Misra, J., Lundquist, J. H., & Templer, A. (2012, June). Gender, Work Time, and Care Responsibilities Among Faculty 1. In *Sociological Forum* (Vol. 27, No. 2, pp. 300-323). Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. doi: 10.1111/j.1573-7861.2012.01319.x; Mitchell, S. M., & Hesli, V. L. (2013). Women don't ask? Women don't say no? Bargaining and service in the political science profession. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 46(2), 355-369. doi: 10.1017/S1049096513000073; Porter, S. R. (2007). A closer look at faculty service: What affects participation on committees?. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 78(5), 523-541. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhe.2007.0027>; Benschop, Y., & Doorewaard, H. (1998). Six of one and half a dozen of the other: the gender subtext of Taylorism and team-based work. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 5(1), 5-18. doi: 10.1111/1468-0432.00042; Ohlott, P. J., Ruderman, M. N., & McCauley, C. D. (1994). Gender differences in managers' developmental job experiences. *Academy of management Journal*, 37(1), 46-67. doi: 10.5465/256769; De Pater, I. E., Van Vianen, A. E., & Bechtoldt, M. N. (2010). Gender differences in job challenge: A matter of task allocation. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 17(4), 433-453. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-0432.2009.00477.x
- ³ Williams, J. C., Multhaup, M., Li, S., Korn, R. M. (2018). You Can't Change What You Can't See: Interrupting Racial & Gender Bias in the Legal Profession. American Bar Association & Minority Corporate Counsel Association.
- ⁴ Ibid
- ⁵ Ibid
- ⁶ Babcock, L., Recalde, M. P., Vesterlund, L., & Weingart, L. (2017). Gender differences in accepting and receiving requests for tasks with low promotability. *American Economic Review*, 107(3), 714-47. doi: 10.1257/aer.20141734
- ⁷ Heilman M. E., & Chen J. J. (2005). Same behavior, different consequences: Reactions to men's and women's altruistic citizenship. *Behavior Journal of Applied Psychology*, 90(3), 431- 441 doi: 10.1037/0021-9010.90.3.431; Allen, T. D. (2006). Rewarding good citizens: The relationship between citizenship behavior, gender, and organizational rewards. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 36(1), 120-143. doi: 10.1111/j.0021-9029.2006.00006.x; Babcock, L., Recalde, M. P., Vesterlund, L., & Weingart, L. (2017). Gender differences in accepting and receiving requests for tasks with low promotability. *American Economic Review*, 107(3), 714-47. doi: 10.1257/aer.20141734; Williams, J. C., & Dempsey, R. W. (2014). What works for women at work: Four patterns working women should know. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- ⁸ Tetlock, P. E. (1983). Accountability and complexity of thought. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 45(1), 74. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.45.1.74; Tetlock, P. E., & Mitchell, G. (2009). Implicit bias and accountability systems: What must organizations do to prevent discrimination?. *Research in organizational behavior*, 29, 3-38. doi: 10.1016/j.riob.2009.10.002