

[BIAS INTERRUPTERS] *small steps big change*

BIAS INTERRUPTERS FOR MANAGERS

Tools for Meetings

THE CHALLENGE

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

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."

THE SOLUTION

Identify the Source of Bias

In your next meeting consider the following:

- **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. 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?

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?”
- ***Don’t give interrupters free reign.*** If a few people are dominating the conversation, address it directly. 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.
- ***Make a seat for everyone at the table.*** When there is an inner- and outer-circle of chairs it can create hierarchy. 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. “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.
- ***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.
- ***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. If someone isn’t speaking up, ask them to weigh in. “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. 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. 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.”