

# [ BIAS INTERRUPTERS ] *small steps big change*

## Identifying Bias in Assignments

### What's the difference between assignments?

- **Glamour Work:** high-profile assignments that are career-enhancing and can set someone up for promotion.
- **Low-Profile Work:** assignments that are necessary and beneficial to the organization but doesn't highlight the individual's career.
- **Office Housework:** literal housework (ordering lunch, cleaning up after a meeting), administrative work (scheduling a time to meet, making sure everyone is on the conference line), and emotional work ("he's upset—can you fix it?")

### Tendencies that lead to inequities in assignments:

- **Modest, helpful, nice; dutiful daughter, office mom?** Prescriptive stereotypes create pressures on women to be mild-mannered team players—so they are under social pressures to volunteer for office housework activities.<sup>1</sup>
- **Due to these stereotypes,** women are also more likely to be *assigned* office housework tasks because assigners tend to believe that women are more likely to accept the task.<sup>2</sup>
- **People of color** also face pressures to volunteer for and accept office housework, due to prescriptive stereotypes, notably that Asian-Americans are supposed to be "deferential worker bees."<sup>3</sup>
- **Not a "details guy."** Majority men are less likely to be asked to do the office housework, and they experience less backlash if they refuse to do it or do a bad job.
- **"Not a team player."** Women and people of color risk pushback if they don't gratefully accept and perform the office housework and low-profile work: "She's just not a team player," or "He thinks highly of himself, doesn't he?"
- **Maternal wall.** Women return from maternity leave to find that they are no longer able to get the quality of assignments that they could before having children.
- **"But she's good at planning parties."** Managers tend to assign office housework to women because "she's good at it," or "she likes it."
- **Golden boy.** Managers may consistently assign glamour work to the same person over and over again because the managers knows "he can get the job done." This can lead to

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<sup>1</sup> Allen, 2006; Babcock, Recalde, Vesterlund & Weingart, 2017

<sup>2</sup> Babcock, Recalde, Vesterlunch & Weingart, 2017

<sup>3</sup> Berdahl & Min, 2012



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a precarious position for a company where only one or two people are capable of doing the most important work.

- **Glamour work?** Women and people of color get less access to the glamour work in their organizations.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes this is due to the belief that women and people of color don't want the high-profile assignments. Data shows this isn't true.<sup>5</sup>

## Six Powerful Bias Interrupters:

- Don't ask for volunteers for office housework.
- Establish a rotation for office housework. This can be based on any factor—seniority, astrological sign, etc.
- Ask women returning from maternity leave if they want the assignment before deciding they don't. You can say, "I have this assignment you would be great for, but I know you're getting back up to speed. Want to jump in? If not, there will be another opportunity in the future."
- Hold everyone accountable for the tasks they are supposed to do. If men do a bad job on a low-profile assignment, that's a performance problem. Treat it as such.
- Before assigning a glamour work assignment, consider *all* eligible employees.
- If only a few people are eligible to do the glamour work, find ways to expand the pool. One way is to have more junior people shadow more senior people.

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<sup>4</sup> Williams et al, 2016

<sup>5</sup> Williams et al, forthcoming; Williams & Multhaup, "For Women and Minorities to Get Ahead, Managers Must Assign Work Fairly," HBR online, March 5, 2018

