

BIAS INTERRUPTERS *small steps big change*

Identifying & Interrupting Bias in Meetings

The four 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, older employees, LGBT+, and class migrants.¹ Extensive research documents that such PIA groups have to be more competent in order to be viewed as equally competent to their peers.

1. **The Stolen Idea.** Ideas offered by PIA groups are likely to be overlooked or credited to others.
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. In addition, mistakes by one PIA group member may reinforce negative group stereotypes.
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.

Tightrope A narrower range of workplace behavior often is accepted from women and people of color. Class migrants and modest or introverted men can face Tightrope problems, too.

1. **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.
2. **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 ends up carrying the emotional labor of the organization rather than pursuing career-enhancing assignments.
3. **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.”
4. **Is she an expert, or just bossy?** Men with expertise are typically listened to more, while women with expertise are listened to less.
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”—planning parties and cleaning up; taking notes and arranging meeting times; picking up the printing or pouring coffee during meetings.
6. **Modesty mandate.** Some groups are brought up with a modesty mandate. Women, Asian-Americans, immigrants and class-migrants are expected to be mild-mannered team players. Those who are “helpful” are coded as lacking ambition.
7. **Racial stereotypes.** Asian-Americans are stereotyped as passive and lacking in social skills; African-Americans as angry or too aggressive; Latinos as hotheaded or emotional.

The **Parental Wall** can affect both fathers and mothers—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.

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2. **“Pregnancy brain.”** Mothers are stereotyped as less competent and committed, are held to higher performance and punctuality standards—and are half as likely to be promoted as identical candidates without children.
3. **“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.

Tug of War Sometimes bias creates conflict within underrepresented groups. 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.
2. **Strategic distancing and the loyalty tax.** People from underrepresented 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.
3. **Passthroughs. PIA:** PIA groups may hold members of their own groups to higher standards because “That’s what it takes to succeed here.” **Tightrope:** Women 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. **Parental wall:** Parents may fault each other for handling parenthood the wrong way—for taking too much time off or too little.

9 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 meeting housework. Check our list →
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.)

Common Meeting Housework Tasks to Watch For

- 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.
- Collating feedback for the next meeting.

ⁱ Class migrants are professionals from working class backgrounds.