

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

## INTERRUPTING BIAS IN MEETINGS

### Tools for Organizations

#### **THE CHALLENGE**

Having expertise increases men’s influence—but decreases women’s.<sup>1</sup> 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 woman 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” (and, we assume, looking for another job!).

#### **THE SOLUTION: A 3 Step Approach**

##### **1. Use Metrics**

Businesses use metrics to assess whether they have progressed towards any strategic goal. Metrics can help you pinpoint where bias exists, and assess the effectiveness of the measures you’ve taken. (Whether metrics are made public will vary from company to company, and from metric to metric.)

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

1. Employ new technologies: is there an interruption problem?
  - GenderEQ: an app that analyzes the ratio of men and women speaking time
  - WomanInterrupted: an app that tracks how many times women are interrupted
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:
  - Who speaks at meetings: is it representative of who attends?
  - Interruptions: is there a culture of interrupting in your meetings? If so, is there a gender or racial difference between 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.<sup>2</sup> Keep track of who gets credit for ideas offered and who originated them.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas-Hunt & Phillips, 2004

<sup>2</sup> Williams et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2018

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- Are the right people getting invited? Be sure everyone who has a part to play is at the meeting.
- Ideas implemented: whose ideas get 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 understand the research and rationale behind the suggested bias interrupters, read our **Identifying Bias in Meetings Worksheet (2-page version or with citations)** which summarizes hundreds of studies.

- **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 for meetings, 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 the Interrupting Bias in Assignments worksheet.
- **Mind the “stolen idea.”** Make sure people get credit for ideas they offered. When you see ideas get stolen, you can say, “I’ve been thinking about that ever since Pam first said it. You’ve added something important, Eric, here’s the next step.”
- **Avoid personality double-standards.** Make sure women and people of color can speak up without backlash. Decades of research have shown that women face social pressures to hedge. (“Don’t you think?”) Both women and people of color may face backlash for speaking in a direct and assertive manner.<sup>3</sup> Have your team read “Identifying Bias in Meetings” to help level the playing field.
- **Ask people to speak up.** Women and people of color often face social pressure to speak in a tentative, deferential manner. If someone isn’t speaking up, ask them to weigh in. And if you know someone has expertise in an area, ask them directly.<sup>4</sup> This strategy can help class migrants and introverts feel included.
- **Have a policy for interruptions.** 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.
- **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

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<sup>3</sup> 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 [worklifeflaw.org](http://worklifeflaw.org)

<sup>4</sup> Kim, Phillips, Thomas-Hunt, & Cabrera, forthcoming; Ridgeway & Nakagawa, 2017

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to hear a broad range of viewpoints. Point out that some people are good at “shooting from the hip” while others need to be given more time and space to feel comfortable speaking up. Some may not even realize they’re frequent interrupters.

- **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. Otherwise, you’re putting mothers and other caregivers at a disadvantage.
- **Avoid arranging furniture in ways that signal an in-group.** When there is an inner- and outer-circle of chairs it can create hierarchy.<sup>5</sup> 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 rearrange chairs so there is only one circle.
- **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.<sup>6</sup>
- **Encourage risk takers.** It’s tough to speak up against a majority opinion—especially for someone who’s not in the majority group.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> Some ideas that 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, s/he will likely pipe down. If you see this happening, say “Let’s hear this idea out.”
- **Empower** people to spot and interrupt bias by reading our Identifying Bias in Meetings Worksheet. Read and distribute the Worksheet to help you understand the rationale behind the steps suggested below.

### 3. Repeat as needed

- **Return to your key metrics.** Did the bias interrupters produce change?
- **If you don’t see change,** you may need to implement a stronger bias interrupter.
- **Use an iterative process** until your metrics improve.

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<sup>5</sup> Sandberg, 2013

<sup>6</sup> Goncalo, Chatman, Duguid, & Kennedy, 2014

<sup>7</sup> Asch, 1956

<sup>8</sup> Asch, 1956

