

MONTH 3

NAVIGATING BIAS

WHEN YOUR QUALIFICATIONS AND
ABILITIES ARE QUESTIONED

INSTRUCTIONS

LEAN IN

INSTRUCTIONS

Activity (60 minutes)

1. Place the **Situation Cards** in a pile.
2. To start, one Circle member draws a **Situation Card** and reads the Situation out loud to the group.
3. **Discuss the following questions as a group:**
 - Have you experienced a similar situation?
 - How did you handle it in the moment?
 - How might you respond to this situation?
4. Have the same Circle member read the back of the card out loud to the group. Are there other ways you could handle the situation? This should only take a few minutes.
5. Take turns reading **Situation Cards** out loud and discussing as a group until you've completed the deck or there are 20 minutes left in the meeting.

Meeting wrap-up (20 minutes)

Close the meeting with the Wrap-Up and Reflect and One Action (refer to the Moderator Guide for instructions.)

SITUATION

It's your first day at a new job and a coworker asks, "Do you know what you're doing?" about a task you should obviously be able to complete.

Why it happens

Performance bias means women often have to provide additional evidence of their skills and knowledge compared to men.¹ In workplaces where most of the workers are men, this can be even more common.²

What to do

You can push back and say that you have been trained to do the task, just like everyone else. One tradeswoman says that when a man said he was surprised by her ability to do something, she responded with, "I'm not sure why that surprises you because I went through the exact same training as you."

You could also simply acknowledge the comment with humor or a nod and then get to work, proving you can handle the task without having to get into a negative back-and-forth. This way, doing the task well is your response.

SITUATION

It's your first week at a new job. You're doing something that is core to your skillset, and a fellow crew member says, "Let me show you how we do this here."

SOLUTION

Why it happens

Women's abilities are underestimated more often than men's.³ Crew members who are men may assume their work is superior to the work of women.

What to do

In the moment, you could push back and explain how you would do the task. Or you could hear him out and thank him for his explanation—he might show you something new and useful. If he's showing you a method you already know, you can share where you learned it as a way of showing your expertise.

SITUATION

You overhear a member of your crew say you were hired or given a new assignment because “they just needed more women.”

Why it happens

When a woman succeeds, some people will discount her accomplishments and assume that her success is due to external factors, like affirmative action, rather than her own hard work.⁴ This tends to be even more common for women of color.⁵

What to do

You could ask a probing question like, “What makes you think that’s the reason I was hired?” Or you could respond with humor, while still making it clear that you deserve to be on the jobsite just as much as your fellow crew members.

SITUATION

A man hired on to his first job is assigned more complicated or technical work, while you are assigned easy, repetitive tasks.

SOLUTION

Why it happens

Women are often hired and promoted based on what they've already accomplished (by proving they have the right skills), while men are hired and promoted based on future potential (we assume they already have the skills they need).⁶ In industries where people may not be used to seeing women do the job, this can mean that women are assigned easier tasks because their supervisors assume they are not capable of handling difficult ones.

What to do

Approach your foreman based on how they like to communicate and what feels most comfortable to you. If humor gets them to listen, you might joke with them about the easy tasks, while making it clear you want the more technical work.

You could also speak with them in private or when they are feeling positive about your work. You might highlight the difference between the tasks you have been assigned compared to the other crew member.

If you already know how to complete the more complicated task, let your foreman know. Make the point that it's in everyone's best interest if you do harder tasks because the crew will get more done. Assigning you easy, repetitive tasks only holds everyone back.

When you arrive at a new job, tradesmen assume you're at a lower level than you really are.

Why it happens

Being mistaken as more junior happens to women more often than men.⁷ This is partly because we unconsciously associate men with leadership.⁸ As a result, women are twice as likely as men to be mistaken for someone much more junior, and women of color are the most likely to experience this.⁹ In industries usually associated with men, workers are probably not used to seeing women in senior positions, simply because it's not common.

What to do

If someone talks to you as though you're at a lower level than you are, you can try talking about your experience to correct them. Another strategy is to mention your role or previous experience when you introduce yourself. This makes your seniority clear without you having to correct anyone.

Keep in mind that your fellow crew members could just be working with old assumptions, not necessarily leading with bad intentions.

SITUATION

Your supervisor brings up a small mistake you made months ago even though a man at your level made a similar error that was overlooked.

Why it happens

Women tend to receive more blame for their mistakes than men do.¹⁰ On a jobsite this can look like cutting more slack for crew members who are men, while unfairly scrutinizing women.

What to do

Acknowledge that you regret making the mistake but point out that you have successfully completed the task many times since then and would prefer to move on and get back to work.

You could also ask whether they ever make mistakes on the job, pointing out that people actually learn from their mistakes. If you feel comfortable, you could also address this with a snappy comeback, like pointing out all the times when you didn't make mistakes.

SITUATION

Someone accuses you
of working too fast and
"trying to make the guys
look bad."

Why it happens

When women succeed at tasks usually associated with men, they tend to be liked less.¹¹ In other words, they're criticized instead of being given credit for their work. Men, however, do not walk the same tightrope between expertise and likeability.¹²

What to do

You can point out that when you work faster, you're helping the team get closer to its goal. This approach might be effective because research shows that when women present their success as unselfish, people like them more.¹³ Depending on your personality, you could also push back by using humor or calmly speaking up for yourself.

SITUATION

You're assigned cleanup duties. You've noticed that this happens to you more than it does to men on your crew who have been there the same amount of time and have the same experience as you.

Why it happens

Due to stereotypes, people expect women to be more giving than men and to accept lower-level tasks.¹⁴ As a result, women are asked to do more housework-like tasks, such as getting coffee, taking notes, or cleaning up.¹⁵ This takes women away from their core work responsibilities and suggests that their time isn't as valuable.¹⁶

What to do

You can suggest a solution that splits work more fairly. One woman with 12 years of experience as a heat and frost insulator explained it like this: "If you are all equals and they choose you to do the cleanup every day, it would be worthwhile to talk to your coworkers and say, 'Hey listen, I don't mind cleaning up, but we are equals here, and I think it is unfair that I have to do it every day. I really think we should take turns.'"

If that doesn't work, then talk to your supervisor and express your concerns. In the moment, you could also push back in a non-confrontational way by sharing what other skills you have and how you'd love to put that experience to work.

SITUATION

A crew member says, "Stay here, this is really dangerous," about a task that you have been trained to do and performed before.

Why it happens

This comment could partly be fueled by doubts about women's competence¹⁷ and partly by the stereotype that women should be protected from physically challenging work.

What to do

Focus on sharing the facts: explain how you will handle the task safely, how long you have known how to do it, and how many times you have done it. If you feel they have good intentions, you can thank them while still gently pushing back by explaining why you genuinely like doing the task and would prefer to do it yourself.

SITUATION

You ask your supervisor for a different assignment so you can learn a new skill. They say no without giving an adequate reason and tell you to keep doing the same task you were doing before.

Why it happens

Women's technical skills, accomplishments, and leadership capabilities often go overlooked.¹⁸ As a result, supervisors may mistakenly feel that on some level, women don't have what it takes and won't last in the industry.¹⁹ This may lead supervisors to unconsciously stop investing in the women on their team by not offering them opportunities to learn new skills.

What to do

You can ask your supervisor to help you learn new skills without complaining about your current work. You might talk to them in private or in a setting where you feel they will be receptive.

It can help to focus on what's in it for them and the team if you learn a new skill—for example, stress that the job gets done faster when crew members are able to complete lots of different types of tasks. When women show how their requests will benefit the team, they are more successful at getting what they ask for.²⁰

You could also use numbers and facts to support your argument, like pointing out that other crew members have learned new skills, or detailing exactly what having you learn the new skill will allow your crew to accomplish.