5 pro tips for mothers returning to the workforce

Lean In Circle Discussion Guide for All Women
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Meeting agenda  approx 90 mins

Member updates  15 mins

Watch video  5 mins

Icebreaker  15 mins

Activities

- Activity 1: Know your worth  15 mins
- Activity 2: Tap into your network  15 mins
- Activity 3: Own your story  15 mins

One Action  3 mins
Getting started

**Member updates**

| 2 mins or less per member | 15-20 mins depending on group size |

Go around your Circle and share personal updates. As a general rule, personal updates should be brief and focus on big changes and important decisions in your life. (It’s OK not to have one every month!) If you have a One Action update, share that with your Circle.

**Read aloud to your Circle**  
1 min

This video and guide are aimed at mothers who took extended breaks from paid work. (By “extended break,” we mean a break longer than a traditional maternity leave.) But even if you’ve never taken an extended break, the activities below can still help you overcome the biases and challenges that all working mothers face.

**Watch video**  
5 mins

**Icebreaker**  
15 mins

- Reflect for a few minutes on any new accomplishments or skills that you gained during your time away from paid work. If you are a working mother who has not taken time away from paid work, reflect on new accomplishments or skills you’ve gained since becoming a mother.

- Go around the room and have everyone share one of their achievements. Cheer each person after they share.
When seeking paid work after an extended break, it’s important to keep a robust sense of your own high value. That’s because during the job search, you might hear biased and unfair messages about women who have resume gaps. If this leads you to doubt your skills or worry that you’ve been out of the workforce too long, stop and challenge that narrative. You’re still the same person and you’re still very qualified!

**Write it down (5 minutes):**

Make a list of your greatest accomplishments and skills. Dig deep to recall achievements you may not have thought of for a while. This exercise will help you to really believe in your own value.

To get yourself started, try responding to the prompts below:

- What are the biggest challenges you’ve faced and overcome at work?
- What are the biggest projects you’ve worked on over your career?
- What are the educational attainments, languages, technical skills, and professional expertise that you worked hard to acquire?
- Can you think of a time when you negotiated for something and received it?
- What are the skills and perspective you’ve gained since stepping out of the workforce?
  - Have you gained a new perspective on your career direction?
  - Have you become newly motivated to succeed at work to be a strong role model or breadwinner for your children?
  - Have you gained new skills through parenting or volunteering?
Discuss as a group (10 minutes):

- Go around the room and share one achievement or skill you’re proud of that you hadn’t thought about for a while.

- Then, have group members share what new skills or perspectives they’ve gained during their career break. Are there any new skills or perspectives you’re becoming aware of that you hadn’t thought of before this meeting?

“When it came to applying for jobs, the question kept coming up, ‘It's been a while since you've done this; do you think you understand the latest technologies?’ And a lot of the time they focused on my career gap, and that's soul-destroying. It also makes you think, ‘I can't do this because I haven't done it for so long.’ But actually, when you rethink about that and reframe it, then you can position it as, ‘Well, I haven't done it in recent times, but the principles are the same.’ Maybe the tools have changed, but I can adapt to change and I can learn quickly.”

Nuala Murphy, non-profit director, diversity and inclusion Lean In Network Leader, Ireland (she/her)
Activity 2: Tap into your network  

When you’re facing maternal bias, it’s very helpful to cultivate and renew relationships with people who know you as a talented professional. They can speak for your skills and connect you to opportunities you might not know about.

Write it down (5 minutes):

- Make a list of people in your professional network with whom it would be helpful to reconnect or build stronger relationships.
- Under each name, make some notes of how you might renew or build each relationship authentically so that you don’t simply start out by asking them for a favor.
  - For example, you can research a topic related to their work and send them an article you think they’d like on the subject.
  - Or, invite them to a one-on-one coffee chat, lunch date, or other activity where you can reconnect and talk about your ambitions.

Discuss as a group (10 minutes):

- Is there someone you’d like to renew your connection with, but aren’t sure how to start? Ask your Circle for ideas.
- Share your best practices and tips for building and maintaining authentic relationships with your professional network.
Activity 3: Own your story 15 mins

Whether you’re writing cover letters, updating your resume or CV, or speaking in interviews, it will help you overcome maternal bias if you present a strong, clear narrative about your skills and passion for your work. It’s also important to own why you stepped out of the workforce and proactively address it in your work history and cover letter, particularly if you have a significant gap.

Write it down (5 minutes):

- One way to own your story is to start your resume or CV with a career summary (two or three sentences at the top of the first page that describe your qualifications, experience, and ambitions at a high level). Use this time to draft a career summary for yourself.

- This is not the right place to address your career gap—instead, it’s better to describe the gap briefly in your employment history and in your cover letter.

- If you already have a career summary included on your resume, you can use this time to brainstorm ways you might update and strengthen it.

Discuss as a group (10 minutes):

- Have everyone read their career summary aloud.

- Each person can signal whether they’re open to receiving live feedback from the group.

- End the discussion by congratulating each other on your bravery in taking on two big challenges—both leaving and re-entering the paid workforce.

“I realized that my career gap is actually something to take confidence from. It helped me understand where I wanted the future of my career to lie.”

Nuala Murphy, non-profit director, diversity and inclusion Lean In Network Leader, Ireland (she/her)
One Action 3 mins

This week, identify one person from Activity 2, “Tap into your network,” to connect with. Circle or highlight their name on your list and commit to reaching out to them.

“The hardships that I faced when I tried to return to work were multifold. I took a break from work for six years after I had my children. I was also in an abusive marriage. It had killed my confidence. I had to fight and overcome those demons inside myself. I also had to change the opinion of hiring managers, because it was a long career break. People questioned my skills and thought I wasn’t up to date. To prove myself, I took every opportunity to update my skills. I went to trainings and read a lot of interesting books. I also took every opportunity to increase my visibility, to network, to make presentations. I was always there.”

Sangita Marda Agarwal, co-founder, communications firm, Lean In Network Leader, India (she/her)

Congratulations on a great meeting!