5 ways to intervene when other women face disrespect

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

Member updates  15 mins

Watch video  8 mins

Icebreaker  15 mins

Activities

- Activity 1: Recognize and combat microaggressions  25 mins
- Activity 2: Identify your privilege  15 mins
- Activity 3: Commit to learning more  10 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 okay not to have one every month!) If you have a One Action update, share that with your Circle.

**Watch video** 8 mins

**Icebreaker** 15 mins

Take a few minutes to think about the following questions. Then, go around the room and share your answers (2 minutes or less each).

- Can you think of a time when you experienced disrespect or a microaggression at work and no one spoke up?
- Is there any way you would have liked someone to intervene, either at the time or afterwards?
At least three-quarters of women routinely face biased comments and actions at work, but only about a third of women say they’ve seen bias against other women in their workplace. It can be difficult to recognize or imagine experiences that you have never personally encountered, but that is why it’s even more important for allies to learn about experiences that differ from our own.

It’s also important to recognize how profound the impact can be. When women hear disrespectful comments every day, no matter how minor, it’s a signal that they don’t have an equal chance.

Below, you can read four real-life stories about serious microaggressions experienced by women. Ask for one volunteer per quote to read each of these stories aloud (5 minutes):

“I had just started at a new job and I was the only person in the office with a visible, physical disability. During a staff meeting, the administrator introduced me, and one of my new coworkers said quietly, ‘She's scary.’” – Nadia Mossburg, senior manager, public sector, Florida, USA (she/her)

“One thing that I think is taken for granted, and people may not notice unless it personally affects them, is the extent to which casual jokes or gossip about LGBTQ people happen in the workplace. I remember being so disappointed, and really scared in some of my earlier jobs, when I would hear people laughing that they had heard one of the leads for a client was a lesbian. I heard it as, ‘This is somebody to laugh about,’ or ‘This is exciting gossip.’ I remember thinking, 'Oh, that's how you feel about people like me.’” – Deena Fidas, managing director, nonprofit, Washington, DC, USA

Continue activity on next page
Activity 1: Recognize and combat microaggressions

I've experienced countless microaggressions related to being a Black woman. Colleagues have wondered how in the world I could speak so well. Colleagues have been openly amazed at my love for classical music and opera.” – Dawn Cornelius, CEO and entrepreneur, tech and consulting industries, Tennessee, USA (she/her)

“'Where are you really from?' is a very common question. Or, 'You speak great English.' And I've had situations where I was mistaken for coworkers. When they realized they'd made a mistake, they laughed it off and said, 'Oh, that's so funny.' But when it happens over and over, it makes you feel like you're not unique.”

– Sue-Ann Hong, president and CEO, non-profit, Georgia, USA (she/her)

Discuss as a group:

- Were any of these stories surprising to you? Have you seen or heard similar microaggressions at work, and if yes, did you intervene? Why or why not? (10 minutes)

- Which of the responses below could you envision using if you witnessed each of the microaggressions in Activity 1? (10 minutes)
  - Asking a question that pushes the person to reflect on their thinking—for example, “What makes you say that?”
  - Directing attention back to objective facts
  - Following up privately with your colleague to explain why their actions were harmful
As we have just heard, at least three-quarters of women routinely face specific microaggressions at work, depending on their mix of identities. Part of learning how to speak up for other women is understanding how you can use your privilege to support colleagues who may find themselves facing bias in the workplace. An excellent place to start is identifying which privileges you hold and learning how these privileges can help you intervene in circumstances where you are more likely to be heard and less likely to be penalized.

To start learning about which privileges you hold, take 5 minutes to read the following statements and select which ones apply to you. (If you have taken Lean In’s Allyship at Work training, you will have seen this list. However, research shows it’s helpful to have periodic refreshers when learning about privilege and allyship.)

Continue activity on next page
Activity 2: Identify your privilege  15 mins

Read the following statements and select which ones apply to you.

| I’ve rarely or never been disrespected or denied an opportunity because of my skin color | I expect chairs or public seating to be comfortable for my body |
| I’m usually not the only person of my race in a room | I don’t think twice about mentioning the gender of my partner or spouse, regardless of whom I’m talking to |
| I can expect there will be a public bathroom available that aligns with my gender | My religion’s holidays are commonly marked on work or school calendars |
| I see my experience reflected in movies and television shows | I don’t often worry whether a new environment is physically safe or accessible |
| I’m not used to regularly being followed or questioned in a store | I’m not typically disrespected or denied opportunities because of my religion |
| I don’t fear for my safety when interacting with the police | My parents helped pay for my education |
| I’m not usually mocked for my accent | I don’t worry about covering a large unexpected expense, like a car repair or medical bill |
| I have never been asked, “Where are you really from?” | My parents or guardians were homeowners |
| I’m not asked to explain or define my sexual orientation or gender | When I say I’m unable to do something, people don’t question whether I’m lying or lazy |
| People refer to me by the right pronoun |  |

Continue activity on next page
Activity 2: Identify your privilege

15 mins

After reading through the list, take 10 minutes to discuss your reaction to the statements with the group.

- Which privileges did you not previously consider an advantage?
- Are there any contexts when your privilege will help you be heard without judgment when you speak up for others facing disrespect?
Activity 3: Commit to learning more

The most important tool in becoming a better ally is working toward a better understanding of the lived experiences of women with traditionally marginalized identities.

Go around your Circle and share a resource that has taught you about specific microaggressions or disrespect faced by other women. Then, brainstorm places we could all learn more.

“I got an email that was just completely out of line. The email right after that was from a woman who immediately jumped in to correct the situation and acknowledge how inappropriate the email was. She immediately followed up with a meeting with me 10 minutes later to say, ‘That was completely out of line. I will talk to that person.’ I felt like it was a long time coming to get that kind of support so quickly after a microaggression.”

Linda Brandt, public health professional, Lean In Network Leader, Minnesota, USA (she/her)
We recommend you close every meeting by committing to a “One Action”—one concrete thing you’re going to do before your next Circle meeting to step outside your comfort zone or practice a new skill.

This week, identify and explore a resource—for example, a book, article, documentary, or podcast—that will teach you more about the microaggressions and disrespect faced by women with identities different from your own.

Congratulations on a great meeting!

Endnotes

1 Full Privilege Exploration activity available in Lean In’s Allyship at Work Personal Workbook.