Working mothers face a lot of bias—here’s how to push back

Lean In Circle Discussion Guide for All Women
# Working mothers face a lot of bias—here’s how to push back

*Lean In Circle Discussion Guide for All Women*

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## Meeting agenda  
approx 90 mins

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Member updates

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

Go around your Circle and share personal updates. Generally, personal updates should be brief and focus on significant 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  9 mins

Icebreaker  15 mins

Take a few minutes to think about the following questions. Then, go around the room and share your answers (1-2 minutes each).

- What assumptions have been made about you as a working mother?
- Are there other aspects of your identity or culture that have impacted how you are viewed as a working mother?

“Reasserting my value upon return from maternity leave was no easy feat. After a few weeks back, I realized that I didn’t have all the time I used to have when I had no kids. I became very deliberate about asking for tasks that were strategic and important and visible.”

Isioma Asiodu-Otughwor, manager, energy industry, Lean In Network Leader, Nigeria (she/her)
Research shows that motherhood makes women more ambitious about their careers. Still, mothers face negative stereotypes that can lead to fewer promotions and fewer job opportunities.\(^1\) And for mothers who hold other identities, such as women of color in white-dominated countries, the stereotypes and challenges of being a working mother are often two-fold.\(^2\)

Knowing that colleagues might question your commitment and ambition, you can plan to proactively challenge these assumptions. In this activity, you’ll practice talking about your career aspirations and make a plan to speak about them with colleagues.

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

Take the next 5 minutes to complete the following prompts:

- Write down three ambitious career goals: one short-term, one long-term, and one big-picture goal.
- For each goal, consider how you’ll describe it to your boss or other senior colleagues to signal your enthusiasm, commitment, and ambition.

**Discuss as a group** (15 minutes):

After considering your answers, share one of your goals with the group. Offer affirmation and feedback to each person after they’ve spoken.
Activity 2: Prioritizing high-visibility projects

One way to combat false narratives about motherhood is to make sure your achievements in the workplace are visible. This makes it much harder for colleagues to doubt your skills or your commitment to your career.

Write it down (10 minutes):

Make a list of your main projects over the next 6 to 12 months and rank them on a scale of highly visible/high priority to low visibility/low priority. Once you have your list, brainstorm how you can delegate some of your lower-priority tasks to other coworkers to make more space for you to focus on your higher priorities. Also, take some time to reflect on whether any other high-visibility projects are coming up and strategize how you can find a way onto those projects.

Discuss as a group (10 minutes):

When you're finished completing your list and brainstorming, go around the Circle and have everyone share either an idea for how they can delegate a low-priority task or an idea for how they are planning to prioritize a high-visibility project.

“Give yourself a break. The best thing any working mother can say to another working mother is to give yourself a break. You can't do everything at one time. There's no such thing as work-life balance. It's integration. You need to ensure that you have a good partner or good support networks in place to share the load. And it's okay to be annoyed sometimes that you can't do it all, but be kind to yourself. Accept that sometimes things will slip, and sometimes that's okay.”

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

• Take one of your ideas from the brainstorming exercise in Activity 2 and start a conversation at work this week about delegating one of your low-priority tasks or starting on a new high-visibility project.

OR

• Commit to communicating one of your career goals from Activity 1 to your manager or another more senior coworker.

Congratulations on a great meeting!

Endnotes


2 Joan C. Williams et al., Double Jeopardy: Gender Bias Against Women in Science (2014).