How to handle being the only one in the room

Lean In Circle Discussion Guide for Asian Women
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Meeting agenda

Member updates
15 mins

Watch video
8 mins

Icebreaker
10 mins

Activities

- Activity 1: Describe the Only experience
15 mins
- Activity 2: Affirm your accomplishments
20 mins
- Activity 3: Identify your network
15 mins

One Action
3 mins

For Circles with only 60 mins, here are suggestions to shorten this agenda:

- Encourage members to watch the video in advance
- Spend 5 mins on member updates
- Skip icebreaker
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.

Watch video 8 mins

Icebreaker 10 mins

As Asian women in white-dominated cultures, we’re often the only person in the room of our identity on two fronts: we can be the only woman or the only Asian person—and sometimes we’re the only one of both identities. Take a few minutes to think about the following questions. Then, go around the room and share your answers (1 minute each).

- How does it feel when you’re not the only person of your identity at your workplace?
- What would your ideal workplace look like?

“I worked in an industry that was predominantly white men. I was the only Asian woman, and the only mother, too. I had impostor syndrome. When I went into the meetings, I felt scrutinized and left behind. I felt I wasn’t seen and my ideas weren’t heard. It was not okay, and I had to shift my thinking. I started going into meetings and collecting myself and thinking, yes, I'm the only Asian woman, but I'm going to try to be myself, be kind, and be direct whenever there's a moment for me to share something.”

Deb C, executive assistant, non-profit, California, USA (she/her)
As we’ve just heard, Onlys are more likely to have challenging experiences at work. For “double Onlys”—for example, for someone who is the only Asian person and the only woman in the room—the experience can be even worse. They’re more likely to experience microaggressions, to feel that promotions aren’t based on objective criteria, and to be unhappy with their company.

In the following activity, the moderator will read a list of experiences that are common when you’re the only Asian woman in the room at work. Each time you hear something that you’ve experienced, raise your hand:

- You felt under pressure to perform
- You felt on guard
- You felt left out
- You felt closely watched
- You felt that your actions would reflect on people like you
- You experienced microaggressions, such as having your competence questioned or being mistaken for someone more junior (microaggressions are more common for Asian women when they’re the only woman of their race at work)

Have everyone share a brief reflection on their experience (1 minute or less per person).
Activity 2: Affirm your accomplishments 20 mins

Taking care of yourself on challenging days is crucial. One way to do this is to create a folder highlighting your accomplishments, both big and small. Your folder may include examples of your best work, positive feedback from your colleagues, or even your own reflections on your achievements.

Take the next 15 minutes to reflect on your accomplishments at work and document them in your achievements folder. You can use any format that works for you, such as a PDF document, the Notes app on your phone, or even a physical notebook. The goal is to create an accessible document that you can refer to on challenging days to remind yourself of your capabilities and successes!

To get yourself started, follow the prompts below and write down:

- The biggest challenges you’ve faced and overcome at work
- Your educational attainments, languages, technical skills, and professional expertise that you worked hard to acquire
- Times when you negotiated for something and received it
- The biggest projects you’ve finished at work over your career
- Any positive feedback you’ve received in the past year

If you are having difficulty creating an achievements folder because you were taught to be humble, take a moment to reflect on why you feel this way. Then, as you write down each achievement, list any supporting evidence you have of your performance—for example, you could write about a positive piece of feedback you received on a project or an increase in your number of customers.

Then, go around the Circle and have each person share one item from their list that they’re proud of (up to 1 minute per person). Applaud each person for their achievement.
Activity 3: Identify your network 15 mins

As we heard in today’s video, talking with another person of your identity about the challenges you both experience at work can be helpful and cathartic. Take 5 minutes to brainstorm a list of people you know who share your identity as an Asian woman and work in your field. These people can be friends, family members, someone in your network, or even members of your Lean In Circle. They can be more junior, more senior, or at the same level as you. You can also add organizations for people of your identity in your field or in the workplace more broadly to this list.

Then, go around the Circle and have each person share what they are looking for in a connection and who they have on their list. After each person shares, leave space for the group to offer suggestions on additional people or organizations to reach out to.

“I’ve often been the only woman, the only person of color, and the only lesbian in the room. I’ve been lucky to find allies around me who are white men. The formative ones have been empathetic and fierce, fierce advocates. They’ve also been honest about their own shortcomings—they’ll acknowledge that they don’t know what to say and they are explicit about wanting to do better. This partly comes out of who they are, and partly from how I try to cultivate authentic relationships with them. I acknowledge the dynamic—that I’m a lesbian and a woman of color, and so I’m the only one with my identity.”

Sarah Lands Ramrup, senior lead, consumer goods industry, Missouri, USA (she/her)
This week, take a few minutes to identify one person from Activity 3 to reach out to.

- Circle or highlight their name on your list.
- Commit to reaching out to them to set up a one-on-one coffee chat, lunch date, or other activity where you can talk about your experiences at work.

Congratulations on a great meeting!