How to handle being the only one in the room

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

**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

The stock photography used in this guide is courtesy of Getty Images.
Member updates

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

Being the only Black woman in a room can be an especially difficult experience. 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 was one of the few African or Black Muslims. So I tend to be very visible. A lot of people will know my name, but they don’t know who I am, and there are a lot of assumptions.”

Filsun Moussa, senior manager, regulatory affairs, Lean In Network Leader, Tennessee, 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 Black person and the only woman in the room—the experience can be even worse. In the following activity, the moderator will read a list of experiences that are common when you’re the only Black 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 Black 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).

“My mindset kind of shifted. Okay, I’m the youngest. I’m the only African American. But how did I get this job? Because I was qualified to be here. It’s not like someone picked me up and said, ‘Here, do the work.’ I am qualified to be here.”

Gladine Frasso, regional manager, environmental health and safety, Lean In Network Leader, Virginia, USA (she/her)
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

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  

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 a Black 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.

“When I worked in the technology industry, I was typically the only Black woman. I benefited from networks of other Black women, sometimes women who were outside of my organization. I would share my challenges with the women in my network and they would offer validation and advice and affirmation that was very helpful.”

Kathryn Edwards, Ph.D., retired director, city government and tech industry, California, 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!