

ALL-IN-ONE MEETING GUIDE

WHAT WORKS FOR WOMEN AT WORK PART 2: TIGHTROPE BIAS

Overview

In many jobs, a person has to take on stereotypically “masculine” qualities (assertive, competitive, and ambitious) to be successful—but women are still expected to be “feminine” (nice, helpful, and modest). As a result, women often find themselves walking a tightrope between being seen as overly feminine, which makes them seem likeable but not as competent, or overly masculine, where they are perceived as competent but not well liked. This meeting will help you identify Tightrope bias and learn strategies to navigate it successfully.

Meeting Goals

- Learn to spot Tightrope bias in your workplace
- Practice strategies for successfully navigating this form of bias

Pre-Meeting Prep

- Watch “What Works for Women at Work Part 2: The Tightrope” individually or as a group at leanin.org/tightrope
- Remind everyone to bring a copy of this PDF
- Remind everyone to bring her One Action Update (if you’re doing this)



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Meeting Agenda

⌚ Approx. 100 minutes for total meeting (based on a group size of ten members)

1 **Check-In** ⌚ Approx. 15 minutes
Warm up, catch up, and get going **p.4**

2 **Educational Activities** ⌚ Approx. 60 minutes
Learn from experts and one another **p.5**

- **Activity 1: Key Takeaways** ⌚ Approx. 10 minutes
Take a few minutes to review the core concepts of the “Tightrope” video **p.5**

- **Activity 2: Navigating Tightrope Bias** ⌚ Approx. 50 minutes
Practice strategies for navigating Tightrope bias and discuss what works best **p.8**

3 **One Action** ⌚ Approx. 15 minutes
The little push you need to go for it **p.10**

4 **Wrap-Up** ⌚ Approx. 10 minutes
What’s next and a few final words **p.12**

Optional Member Materials

One Action Update **p.14**

Meeting Guide

Check-In

Warm up, catch up, and get going

🕒 Approx. 15 minutes

Step 1: Icebreaker



Group activity



1 minute or less per member

Use this icebreaker to see how many of your Circle members have experienced different aspects of Tightrope bias. Go through the following statements one by one and ask members to raise their hand if they relate to the experience. Avoid the urge to slip into conversation.

- Raise your hand if you have ever received feedback that you have “sharp elbows” or need to tone it down a bit
- Raise your hand if you have ever received feedback that you should show more confidence or that you lack “executive presence”
- Raise your hand if you have experienced both of these pieces of feedback in the same job

Step 2: Member updates



Group activity



2 minutes or less per member

Once you’re warmed up, 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 at the same time. (A One Action is one concrete action you committed to take at your last meeting; the goal of a One Action is to step outside your comfort zone or practice a new skill.)

For example, a member update might go like this: “Since our last meeting, I asked my boss for a big assignment and got it. I’m thrilled but a little nervous [personal update]. For my One Action, I asked that coworker I’ve been struggling with out for lunch. She immediately said yes, and I was surprised by how easily we got along. I can see it helping in the office, and we’re going out for lunch again next week—her invite! [One Action Update].”

Education Activities

Learn from experts and one another

🕒 Approx. 60 minutes for all activities

Activity 1: Key Takeaways

👤 Individual activity

🕒 10 minutes

Before you jump into today's meeting, review the primer on gender bias below and the key takeaways of our "Tightrope" video individually or as a group:

Understanding gender bias

We rely on mental shortcuts to simplify the world around us. Gender stereotypes are one of these mental shortcuts, and they often lead us to make biased assumptions that disadvantage women at work. For example, we assume that men are strong, driven, ambitious leaders. We assume that women are warm, supportive, nurturing caretakers. When women act in ways that don't match our assumptions we're often less accepting of them and may even penalize them. All of us hold these biased assumptions in some way, but they are hard to acknowledge, which makes it difficult to take steps to counteract them. The more we understand about these biases and how they work, the better we're able to address them.

Identifying Tightrope bias

When most people think of an effective leader, what often springs to mind is someone who is assertive, competitive, and ambitious—stereotypically masculine qualities. But women are still expected to be nice, helpful, and modest—stereotypically feminine qualities. As a result, women often find themselves walking a tightrope between being seen as overly feminine, which makes them seem likeable but not as competent, or overly masculine, which makes them seem competent but not well liked. In order to get ahead, women need to be both competent and likeable, so this tension can disadvantage women's careers. Ask yourself, who would you rather hire: the man who is both competent and likeable or the woman who is equally competent but just not that well liked?

Activity 1: Key Takeaways (cont.)

Strategies for addressing Tightrope bias

“Too masculine” patterns and solutions—when women are respected but not liked

Women tend to face pushback for behavior that’s admired in their male colleagues. Here are how the patterns surface and how women can interrupt them:

Pattern: He’s “assertive.” She’s “aggressive.”

While men are admired for assertiveness, being direct, outspoken, or openly ambitious can trigger pushback for women.

Solution: Practice gender judo

If you get feedback that you’re not likeable (you’re “too bossy” or “abrasive”), be deliberate about when you exhibit feminine and masculine qualities—both can be advantageous when used thoughtfully. One CEO told Joan Williams, “I’m warm Ms. Mother ninety-five percent of the time so when I need to be tough, I can be.” She’s doing something many people see as masculine (being an outspoken leader) but also meeting expectations that she be feminine (by playing into the “office den mother” role).

Pattern: He’s “confident in his abilities.” She’s a “shameless self-promoter.”

While men are often applauded when they discuss their successes, women tend to encounter pushback for not being modest enough.

Solution: Form a posse.

Organize a group of coworkers who will celebrate one another’s successes. You’ll all benefit from this arrangement: promoting your coworkers is good for their careers and elevates your own status.

Pattern: He “always speaks his mind” while she “really lost it in that meeting.”

Expressing anger or frustration often increases a man’s perceived status, but it decreases a woman’s.

Solution: Show anger carefully.

Use anger sparingly and be mindful of how you communicate it. When you do, make it clear that you’re not just being emotional; you have a legitimate business concern. For example, you can say, “If I look angry, it’s because I am angry. You’ve jeopardized the success of [insert shared business goal here], and that matters.”

Activity 1: Key Takeaways (cont.)

Strategies for addressing Tightrope bias (cont.)

“Too feminine” patterns and solutions—when women are liked but not respected

On the other side of Tightrope bias, women may unintentionally undermine themselves by continuing patterns of behavior that make them seem likeable but not competent. Here are common patterns and ways to interrupt them:

Pattern: Submissive body language

Communicating with deferential body language can signal submissiveness. This includes standing off balance, crossing your arms and legs, or otherwise taking up less space.

Solution: Use strategic body language

To be perceived as more confident and assertive, assume an expansive posture. When sitting in meetings, keep your torso upright or lean slightly forward. Uncross your arms and place them on the table.

Pattern: Tentative speaking style

Certain ways of speaking can make your statements sound less assertive and make your ideas less likely to be heard. This includes “upspeak,” or ending statements as if they are questions, and using hedging phrases such as “I’m not sure but . . .”

Solution: Don’t undercut yourself when you speak.

Make statements with confidence and avoid upspeak. If you don’t believe what you’re saying, why should anyone else? If you have trouble getting a word in, wait until someone is reaching the end of a thought and start speaking over them. If they don’t stop, say, “I’m sorry; I thought you were finished.”

Pattern: Office housework

Since women are expected to be helpful and supportive in the workplace, they are often given large amounts of “office housework,” including:

- Administrative or support tasks such as taking notes, ordering lunch, planning parties, and printing documents.
- Important but undervalued work such as organizing conferences or planning for summer interns.

The problem with this type of work is that it is time-consuming and rarely gets employees noticed.

Solution: Rotate office housework and use the strategic no.

If you’re asked to take on office housework do it once graciously, then work behind the scenes to ensure the task is rotated among your coworkers so you’re not asked to do it again. As a way to get out of undervalued work, seek out career-enhancing assignments, such as managing a high-profile project. Filling your plate with high-value work empowers you to turn down undervalued work. For example, you might say, “I’d love to help, but I’m working with Ted on an important strategic initiative. Joe would be perfect for this.”

Activity 2: Navigating Tightrope Bias

⌚ Approx. 50 minutes

Step 1: Select a common scenario to role-play

 Group activity

⌚ 10 minutes

Break into small groups of two or three members. Each group should select a scenario to role-play from the options below (or create their own), then take a few minutes to decide how they plan to act it out before coming back together as a large group. Try to limit your group's role-play to five minutes or less.

Scenario 1: Leading without pushback

Your company is in danger of losing an important client because someone on your team disregarded the plan you all agreed to. You are understandably upset that this person didn't stick to the plan. Role-play how you will confront this person, thinking carefully about how you can show your frustration without being viewed as overly emotional.

Scenario 2: Softening your approach to address pushback

Your work is highly regarded, but you have a reputation for having "sharp elbows" and being overly ambitious. What are some steps you can take to improve your reputation? Role-play a key conversation you need to have.

Scenario 3: Unloading office housework

You are one of two women on your team, and you both are consistently asked to order lunch, get people on the line for conference calls, and do other office housework. The men at your level are rarely or never asked to do these things. Role-play how you would bring this up with your team with a goal of more equally distributing these tasks.

Step 2: Perform your scenarios

 Group activity


⌚ 30 minutes

Go around your Circle and have each group role-play its scenario.

Activity 2: Navigating Tightrope Bias (cont.)

Step 3: Discuss successful strategies for navigating Tightrope bias

 Group activity

 20 minutes

In the larger Circle, use the role-playing activity and your own experiences to discuss ways to navigate Tightrope bias. Consider the following questions to get your discussion going (you don't have to answer all of them):

- What strategies worked well in the role-plays? Why?
- What strategies have you used in related situations? *For this discussion, share experiences but do not give advice (i.e., use “I” statements, such as, “What I personally found helpful in my situation was . . .”).*
- How can you involve other colleagues and mentors to help you navigate these situations?

One Action

The little push you need to go for it

🕒 Approx. 15 minutes

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.

Step 1: Identify the action you’re going to take

👤 Individual activity

🕒 5 minutes

Between now and the next meeting, practice using the strategic no. If a coworker asks you to take on undervalued work, share that you’re focused on helping the team with a specific strategic or otherwise important initiative and that you’d be happy to recommend another colleague to take on the task.

What is one piece of undervalued work that you’d like to avoid in the future?


What strategic work is currently part of your role? If you don’t have any important projects, how can you get more access to career-developing work?

Who in the organization can you recommend to take on undervalued work in your place?

One Action (cont.)

Step 2: Share your One Action with your Circle

 Group activity

 1 minute or less per member

One by one, go around your Circle and complete the following statements:

- Over the next month, I plan to use the strategic no when I'm asked to . . .
- I'll explain that I'm busy helping the team with . . .
- I'll say that the project is perfect for . . .

Move quickly from member to member, and consider cheering one another on as you go.

Housekeeping Note: We recommend you give an update on your One Action during your next meeting. On page 14 of this PDF, you'll find an optional worksheet to help you prepare your update.

Wrap-Up

What's next and a few final words

🕒 Approx. 10 minutes

Step 1: Finalize logistics of your next meeting

👥 Group activity

🕒 10 minutes

Before you break, make sure you have the basics covered for your next meeting, including day and time, location, and food and drink responsibilities. Decide what you're going to do when you get together or who is going to send out ideas. You may also want to talk through what worked—and what didn't—in today's meeting so you can brainstorm improvements going forward.

Step 2: Close on an energetic and inspirational note

👥 Group activity

🕒 1 minute or less

Go around the Circle, with each person sharing one key takeaway or reflection from this meeting.

Congratulations on a great meeting.

See the following pages for a One Action Update Worksheet.

One Action Update

Use the following prompts to prepare your One Action Update before your next meeting, to maximize your time with your Circle.

- I got the chance to practice the strategic no when . . .

- As a result, I was able to . . .

- After our conversation, I felt . . .

- In the future, I will try . . .