

ALL-IN-ONE MEETING GUIDE

WHAT WORKS FOR WOMEN AT WORK PART 3: MATERNAL WALL BIAS



Overview

Motherhood triggers assumptions that women are less competent and not as committed at work. This “Maternal Wall” is one of the strongest biases women face, and even women without children can be affected. This meeting will help you identify Maternal Wall bias and practice tactics for interrupting it.

Meeting Goals

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

Pre-Meeting Prep

- Watch “What Works for Women at Work Part 3: Maternal Wall” individually or as a group at leanin.org/maternalwall
- 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. 20 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 “Maternal Wall” video p.5

- **Activity 2: Navigating Maternal Wall Bias** 🕒 Approx. 50 minutes
Practice strategies for navigating Maternal Wall bias and discuss what works best p.7

3 **One Action** 🕒 Approx. 15 minutes
The little push you need to go for it p.9


4 **Wrap-Up** 🕒 Approx. 10 minutes
What’s next and a few final words p.11

Optional Member Materials
One Action Update p.13

Meeting Guide


Check-In

Warm up, catch up, and get going

 Approx. 15 minutes

Step 1: Icebreaker

 Group activity


 5 minutes

Use this icebreaker to see how many of your Circle members have experienced different aspects of Maternal Wall 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're a mother who is currently working or looking for a job
 - Keep your hand up if you feel that . . .
 - People questioned your commitment to your job after you had children
 - People have directly or indirectly suggested you should work fewer hours
 - Your status as a mother negatively impacted a job interview or performance review
- Now raise your hand if you do not have children
 - Keep your hand up if . . .
 - You worry that you will be perceived differently in your job if you have children
 - People assume you will have children and that it will affect your work

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 both 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 "Maternal Wall" 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 Maternal Wall bias

Motherhood triggers assumptions that women are less competent and less committed to their careers. People often assume that women can't be all-in at work and committed as mothers at home. This assumption has a staggering impact on women's careers. In one study women with children were 79 percent less likely to be hired, only half as likely to be promoted, offered an average of \$11,000 less in salary, and held to higher performance and punctuality standards than identical women without children.¹ Conversely, when mothers are particularly high performers, they are often judged for not being maternal enough.

Here are the most common ways Maternal Wall bias can show up in an organization:

- When mothers are working out of the office, people tend to assume they're home with their kids.
- People tend to remember the one time a mother was late but not the numerous days she was on time.
- Mothers may not be offered challenging assignments or promotions because managers assume they don't have time for extra work. The reasoning might be, "I know this isn't a good time for you, since you have a new child."
- Mothers may hear judgmental comments like, "I don't see how you can leave your kids so much. My wife could never do that."
- Sometimes mothers are told flat out that they should be home with their children.
- Younger women may feel their career opportunities are being limited by the assumption that they will have kids eventually.

¹ Shelley J. Correll, Stephen Bernard, and In Paik, "Getting a Job: Is There a Motherhood Penalty?," American Journal of Sociology 112, no. 5 (2007): 1297–339.

Activity 1: Key Takeaways (cont.)

Strategies for addressing Maternal Wall bias

1. Voice your commitment

When you return from maternity leave, signal that you remain committed. Ask for a meeting where you can share your short-term and longer-term career goals. Ask your manager how you can work to meet those goals. Be sure to highlight anything that would demonstrate your commitment and value (if you are willing to travel, if your spouse is willing to relocate, etc.). Don't be afraid to let your manager know if you are the primary earner in your household.

2. Adjust the way you communicate

Be explicit about why you're out of the office so people don't assume you're taking time off to be with your kids. If you're traveling for business, briefly describe why you are away in your auto-response email message. Many women find it helpful to adjust how they communicate to others when they have family commitments. For example, list family appointments on the calendar as "out of office meeting." While it can be frustrating that we need these tactics, they can help you shape people's understanding of your commitment to work.

3. Senior women can set an example

Workplaces need to make it acceptable for employees to spend time with their families. If you're in a senior position, use your authority to make it okay for more junior mothers and fathers to spend time with their children. One way to do this is to let others know when you're leaving the office for a family-related matter.

4. Don't hold yourself to an unrealistic standard

Focus on what you're doing well as a working mother instead of judging yourself. It's not realistic to always be available to your children, and striving for perfection isn't good for you or them.

Activity 2: Navigating Maternal Wall Bias

🕒 Approx. 60 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: Fielding family questions in an interview

You're in a job interview and someone casually asks if you have children or are planning to in the near future. Role-play a response.

Scenario 2: Returning from maternity leave

You have just returned from maternity leave. Role-play a meeting with your manager in which you communicate that you remain committed to your career.

Scenario 3: Responding to unhelpful advice

Your team has just pulled an all-nighter to meet a major product deadline. You are heading home. A colleague, whose wife stays home full-time, thanks you for your team spirit and says, "I don't know how you do it. Raising our children takes all of my wife's time and commitment." Role-play a response.

Step 2: Perform your scenarios

👥 Group activity


🕒 20 minutes

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

Activity 2: Navigating Maternal Wall Bias (cont.)

Step 3: Discuss successful strategies for navigating Maternal Wall bias

 Group activity

 20 minutes

In the larger Circle, use the role-playing activity and your own experiences to discuss ways to navigate Maternal Wall 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

Write down one short-term and one long-term career goal.

Choose one goal. When will you share this with your manager? How will you demonstrate your commitment to your goal?

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:

- The goal I will share with my manager is . . .
- I will share this goal on . . . [insert date when you plan to meet with your manager] . . .
- I will demonstrate my commitment by . . . [insert action]

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 13 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 page 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.

- The goal I shared with my manager is . . .

- I demonstrated my commitment by . . .

- I'm still working on . . .