

ALL-IN-ONE MEETING GUIDE

WHAT WORKS FOR WOMEN AT WORK PART 4: TUG OF WAR BIAS

Overview

The “Tug of War” refers to conflict among women that stems from several sources. The three other forms of gender bias—Prove it Again, Tightrope, and Maternal Wall bias—often play out among women to create Tug of War conflicts. And sometimes in environments where women have a fragile hold on power in the workplace, they receive the message that the politically savvy thing to do is to distance themselves from other women.

Meeting Goals

- Identify Tug of War bias in the workplace
- Understand how other women experience this bias
- Learn how to avoid this bias trap and support your female colleagues

Pre-Meeting Prep

- Watch “What Works for Women at Work: Tug of War” individually or as a group at leanin.org/tugofwar

Please note: We recommend watching the other videos in the series first to get a primer on the common patterns of bias that women and men fall into at work:

- “Prove It Again”: leanin.org/proveitagain
 - “The Tightrope”: leanin.org/tightrope
 - “Maternal Wall”: leanin.org/maternalwall
- Remind everyone to bring a copy of this PDF



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Meeting Agenda

🕒 Approx. 105 minutes for total meeting (based on a group size of ten members)

1 Check-In 🕒 Approx. 10 minutes
Warm up, catch up, and get going **p.4**

2 Educational Activities 🕒 Approx. 70 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 “Tug of War” video **p.5**

- **Activity 2: Navigating Tug of War Bias** 🕒 Approx. 60 minutes
Practice strategies for navigating Tug of War 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 Worksheet
One Action Update **p.14**

Meeting Guide

Check-In

Warm up, catch up, and get going

🕒 Approx. 10 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 Tug of War bias. Go through these statements one by one and have members respond.

- Raise your hand if you ever feel like other women judge your work-life decisions
- Raise your hand if a woman has called you “too direct” or “pushy”
- Raise your hand if you feel like women are more critical of one another than they are of men

Education Activities

Learn from experts and one another

🕒 Approx. 70 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 "Tug of War" 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. All of us hold these biases, 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 Tug of War bias

In workplaces that make it politically costly to align with other women, women sometimes align with men to minimize the pushback they face. In addition, the three patterns of gender bias we've covered in earlier videos—Prove It Again, Tightrope, and Maternal Wall—often play out in ways that spark a Tug of War among women.

Prove It Again: Women often need to provide more evidence we're competent—to "prove it again." A Tug of War arises when women apply harsher standards to one another because "that's what it takes to succeed here as a woman."

Tightrope bias: When most people think of a high-powered professional, what often springs to mind is someone who behaves in masculine ways. Therefore many women feel they have to behave in masculine ways in order to be seen as competent—but women are also expected to be feminine and friendly. That's why women often find themselves walking a tightrope between being seen as too masculine to be likeable or too feminine to be competent. The Tug of War occurs when women perpetuate this bias by judging one another's personal styles. You might hear Tightrope bias expressed in phrases like "no wonder no one likes her" (she's too masculine) or "no wonder no one takes her seriously" (she's too feminine).

Activity 1: Key Takeaways (cont.)

Maternal Wall: 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 if they're committed as mothers at home. Conversely, when mothers are particularly high performers, they are often judged for not being maternal enough. Women can fall into this bias trap as well; we sometimes judge one another's decisions because we're struggling to find the right balance ourselves. You can hear this bias surface when women make judgmental statements like, "Wow, you travel a lot for a new mother" or "I don't know why you need to take a longer leave—I worked full-time and my kids are fine."

Strategies for addressing Tug of War bias

1. Resist the urge to judge other women.

Make an effort to assume the best of other women. Like you, they feel the extra pressure created by gender bias and are doing the best they can. If you hear someone suggesting they dislike a woman because she is aggressive or has "sharp elbows," request a specific example of what the woman did and then ask, "Would you have the same reaction if a man did the same thing?" In many cases, the answer will be no. When you're having a negative response to a woman at work, run yourself through the same thought process and give her the benefit of the doubt—odds are she's just doing her job.

2. Be direct to resolve conflict.

If you feel like another woman is undercutting you, don't let it pass. Ignoring the problem only allows it to create more tension. Instead, ask for a private meeting with her and say, "It's my perception—and I may be wrong—that sometimes you don't view me in the best light. I'd really like to have a good relationship with you. Please help me understand if somehow we've gotten off on the wrong foot."

3. Respect one another's experiences.

Women from different generations sometimes judge one another harshly. Older women can feel that they paid their dues, so younger women should, too—without realizing that their trailblazing efforts are paving the way for the next generation to have a better experience. Younger women can think older women are overly assertive without realizing how hard they had to push to create a path for female leadership. Recognize that women have had different experiences and look for opportunities to understand and even celebrate those differences.

Activity 1: Key Takeaways (cont.)

4. Collaborate with other women.

If you are in conflict with another woman, try to find a project you can collaborate on together. This works particularly well if the project can be done off-site, removing any environmental factors that may be contributing to your Tug of War. Mentoring programs and philanthropy efforts offer good opportunities to build positive working relationships.

5. Advocate for other women.

Women do not need to advocate for all women—after all, men don't advocate for all men. That said, supporting other women is a good way to build your network and to live up to your ideals. For example, if you're in a meeting and notice that a woman's idea is ignored but a man is praised for the same idea later, say, "Great idea! I loved it when Shoachen originally brought it up, and I'm glad you reiterated it." In addition, if you see a woman doing more than her share of the office housework like taking notes or planning parties, help her find more career-enhancing work at your organization. For more tips on supporting other women at work, visit leanin.org/tips/workplace-ally.

Activity 2: Navigating Tug of War Bias

🕒 Approx. 60 minutes

Step 1: Select a common scenario to role-play

 Small 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 your own) and take a few minutes to decide how you plan to act out the scenario before coming back together as a large group.

Scenario 1: Handling a hard conversation

Someone on your team dropped the ball, so you're tough on her in a meeting. Afterward, you hear her call you "difficult" when talking to another team member. Role-play a response.

Scenario 2: Choosing what's right for you

You've decided that you need to cut back your hours. A more senior colleague takes you aside and advises against it. "You'll regret it," she says. "I've seen over and over again how part-time tracks derail women's careers." Role-play a response.

Scenario 3: Pushing back against stereotypes

One of your female colleagues makes a critical comment about another woman on your team: "No wonder no one takes her seriously with that little girl voice of hers." Role-play a response.

Step 2: Perform your scenarios

 Group activity

🕒 30 minutes

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

Activity 2: Navigating Tug of War Bias (cont.)

Step 3: Discuss successful strategies for navigating Tug of War bias

 Group activity

 20 minutes

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

- What strategies seemed to work well in the role-plays? Why?
- What strategies have you used in related situations?
- How can you involve other women 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

Choose one of these actions:

1. Between now and the next meeting, identify a female coworker with whom you’ve experienced tension or wished you worked more seamlessly and ask her to lunch. Use the time to deepen your relationship.
2. If you haven’t experienced tension with female coworkers, invite a woman at a different point in her career to join you for lunch. Use the time to develop a better understanding of her point of view and personal experiences.

Whom do you plan to ask to lunch?

What would you like to say to her?

How do you hope this lunch will help you and your relationship with this woman?

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:

- I plan to have lunch with . . .
- My goal during the lunch is . . .

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 minutes or less

Go around the Circle and use one word to complete the following statement.

- When we support one another, women can . . .

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 had lunch with . . .

- The primary things I learned during lunch were . . .

- One thing that surprised me was . . .