

LEAN IN

How to handle being the only one in the room

Lean In Circle Discussion Guide

The
Women
at Work
Collection

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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
- Activity 2: Affirm your accomplishments
- Activity 3: Identify your network

15 mins

20 mins

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

Being the only woman in the room at work can be a 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 in the room who shares your background or identity?



“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 women in my network and they would offer validation and advice and affirmation.”

Kathryn Edwards, Ph.D., retired director, city government and tech industry, California, USA (she/her)

Activity 1: Describe the Only experience

15 mins

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 woman and the only person of their race 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 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 disrespectful comments or actions, such as having your competence questioned or being mistaken for someone more junior

Have everyone share a brief reflection on their experience (1 minute or less per person).

“Now that I'm in investing, I often find myself to be one of the only women in the room. What really helps is to make sure that I connect with other women early on. And if there are no other women, it helps to find a man in the department who can be an ally. That's really helped me overcome and feel more confident in those situations.”

Kayla Duncan, product manager, banking, Lean In Network Leader, Canada (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 for 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

15 mins

As we heard in today's video, talking with another person who shares your background about the challenges you both experience at work can be helpful and cathartic. Take 5 minutes to brainstorm a list of colleagues you know who work in your field and/or in similar roles. They can be more junior, more senior, or at the same level as you. You can also add organizations for women 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 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)



One Action

3 mins

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.



“I work in the banking industry. I was more or less prepared that it would be a male-dominated environment. My mindful decision was to start building my circle outside of work. I needed a support circle of women, a safe space to talk.”

Evelina Rimkute, software test manager, Lean In Network Leader, Switzerland (she/her)

Congratulations on a great meeting!

