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WORK ON IT

Prevent, don't just pardon, man interrupting

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As a woman who has been in the workplace for nearly 35 years, I have a lot of experience with being interrupted by men. I also have experienced many times a phenomenon in which I make a point or share an idea in a meeting that does not appear to catch hold, only to hear the same thing stated by a man to widespread agreement a few minutes later.

As it turns out, those minor annoyances have been the subject of more than 30 years of social science research. In 1985, for example, a Harvard researcher collected numerous studies demonstrating that in mixed-sex conversations, women are interrupted far more frequently than men are. Extensive study of the phenomena has not brought them to an end, however.

Sarcastic vocabulary

A new vocabulary that is intentionally sarcastic has emerged to highlight the frustration that interruptive workplace behavior causes. Put a hash tag in front of any of the following words to find hundreds of amusing and not-so-amusing posts on Twitter:

- **Mansplaining:** A man interrupting a woman to explain to her something that she actually knows more about than he does.
- **Man interrupting:** The unnecessary interruption of a woman by a man.
- **Bropropriating:** A man repeating a woman's idea and taking credit for it.

Those definitions are courtesy of Dr. Arin N. Reeves, a Chicago consultant on leadership and inclusion in the workplace. Reeves recently conducted a

study to determine whether there was a gender difference in who interrupts or gets interrupted in business meetings. She published her research results earlier this year, and her report is available on her consulting firm's website, www.nextions.com.

During approximately 41 hours of conversations in live meetings, conference calls, and panel discussions, Reeves observed a total of 859 interruptions. Nearly 68 percent of the interruptions were by men, and men were far more likely to interrupt women than they were to interrupt other men. Nearly 72 percent of the time, men interrupted women.

Reeves' study did not end with observation. She also interviewed the participants in the conversations she observed. Most of the men reported not being aware of either interrupting anyone or having been interrupted. The women she interviewed, however, overwhelmingly were conscious of being interrupted. Reeves' female research subjects consistently reported that they believed they were interrupted because they are women and, as a result, felt "disrespected," "invisible," and "frustrated."

Championing change

Based on her observations, Reeves concludes her study with a number of suggestions on how business leaders can discourage man interruptions and the like. Several of her ideas seem quite sensible:

- **Create and use agendas for meetings.** More structure means fewer interruptions. When a meeting's purpose, leader, and outcomes are well-defined, participants have more clarity on who should be speaking and why.



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- **Take turns.** Reeves observed that when meeting leaders asked participants to go around the table and give their perspectives, interruptions were much less frequent. The take-turns approach makes it clear who should be speaking and who is next in line to speak, with the additional benefit of getting all participants' perspectives.
- **Speak up.** Reeves observed that women frequently get negative feedback if they are seen as "complaining" about being interrupted in the heat of the moment. However, if the person who is interrupted speaks to the interrupter after the meeting, the interrupter may not be offended and may be more conscious about interrupting the next time. Likewise, if you observe bropropriation,

whether it's your idea or someone else's, a gentle reminder of the source of the idea is an effective tool to give credit where credit is due.

Keep those ideas in mind the next time you lead a meeting. While mansplaining, maninterrupting, and bropropriating are funny words, their effect in the workplace is to impede effective communication and decision making.



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