

Meeting Etiquette

Maninterrupt [2]: v. An unnecessary interruption of a woman, usually by a man.

Bropropriate [2]: v. The act of taking credit for a woman's idea.

It is likely that most men have never given much thought to the behaviors of maninterrupting and bropropriating. I certainly had not, but I suspect that I have been guilty of these actions in the past, though not intentionally. That is why the article by Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant [1], and the follow-up by Jessica Bennett [2], were so enlightening to me. They made me much more aware of these behaviors and, more importantly, how negative an impact they can have on our colleagues. In a field with a limited number of female professionals (approximately 500 out of 9500 members of the IEEE Control Systems Society are women), it is particularly important that the community be as supportive and respectful as possible of all of our colleagues.

The articles outline various factors that lead to this behavior and also suggest remedial actions. According to Bennett [2], one such action is to acknowledge that many of us harbor unconscious biases against women who exhibit traditionally male traits (such as decision making, authority, or leadership). We then often dislike these women or judge them to be aggressive, while men who exhibit similar traits are frequently deemed successful and worthy of respect. Unfortunately, women are also often judged negatively simply due to the way they speak [3] or dress [4], leading to further biases

in their treatment in business and technical settings. But acknowledgement of the issues is at least the first step toward correcting for these biases.

Further possible actions are to proactively support female participants in meetings by giving them due credit for a good idea that they propose and by recommending that meeting leaders ensure that female speakers have the chance to finish their thoughts when they are interrupted. Another remedial action is to invoke a no-interruption rule in meetings, thereby giving all speakers a chance to complete their contributions. In addition, make sure that the group does not naturally assume that one of the women at the meeting will be the note taker. If that happens, intervene (or volunteer).

With these strategies in mind, I tried an experiment. In my next meeting, I paid particular attention to my interactions with the other participants and caught myself just in time to avoid a case of "maninterrupting." My experiment continues, and I am still waiting for a good chance to correct a "bropropriation" by making sure that a female colleague receives appropriate credit for her idea. I find that I am more aware of behaviors that I had previously not recognized to have a negative impact on my female colleagues. Interestingly, this monitoring of one's behaviors leads to a slightly more passive role in meetings, but interrupting male colleagues is not particularly professional

behavior either. I also find that speaking less frequently gives me much more time to think before speaking again, which certainly isn't a bad thing!

Ensuring that all of our colleagues feel respected and comfortable within professional settings is a shared responsibility [5]. Real change can occur if we examine the unconscious biases that we might be harboring. I invite all readers of this short editorial to undertake a similar experiment in the next meeting that you lead or attend. Taking small steps to be more aware of our actions and assumptions during our interactions with women colleagues should engender a much better and more collegial atmosphere for everyone.

Speaking less frequently gives me much more time to think before speaking again.

REFERENCES

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