



Dealing with Manterruption

BY PAM WOLDOW AND DOUG RICHARDSON

Sadly, it has become conventional wisdom that decades of diversity programs and attention to gender bias have produced little meaningful progress in the status, leverage, and careers of female lawyers. In 2015, as ever before, the status quo remains resolutely male dominated (except in the leadership of corporate legal departments, where—gratifyingly to the champions of gender equality—an increasing percentage of chief legal officers are women). Flight from law firms by females of all ages and career stages is endemic, a catastrophic loss of talent.

Hey, You. Shut Up.

Recent social research has highlighted two particularly powerful and pervasive symptoms of asymmetrical gender clout: “manterruption” and “bropropriation.” These sarcastic neologisms refer to the widespread tendency of men to interrupt women in group settings where power stakes are high (manterruption) and men’s tendency to appropriate women’s comments and ideas as their own (bropropriation).

Such respected researchers as Dr. Arin Reeves (author of *One Size Never Fits All* [ABA 2014]), Yale psychologist Victoria Brescoll, researcher Sheryl Sandberg, Wharton professor Adam Grant, and empirical linguist Kieran Snyder, among others, have documented the startling extent to which men—consciously or not—grab the microphone from women in group meetings and never give it back. Snyder, for example, found that men interrupt at twice the rate of women, and are three times more likely to interrupt women as to interrupt other men. Reeves’ research, which focused heavily on lawyers and professionals, showed that “an overwhelming majority (89+ percent) of men’s interruptions of women were intrusive, but only 42 percent of men’s interruptions of other men were intrusive. Less than 20 percent of women’s interruptions of *men or women* were intrusive.”

What happens when men habitually overpower women in group conversation? If a woman fights to hold her ground in the moment, she often is later taken aside, told she is “being difficult,” and told to cut it out—or else. Conversely, many other women, particularly younger lawyers still fighting for traction (and today even for their jobs), hold back, relinquish credit, let their ideas be poached or attributed to males... and then eventually shut down, become more passive and less creative, feel less engaged, and experience anxiety because they fear somehow they are at fault. The huge and unacceptable attrition rate of female lawyers throughout the profession amply demonstrates the dire effects of corrosive communication behaviors.

Stifle Yourself, Edith.

The social researchers confirmed what many women already know: there’s little point in getting a seat at the table if the inter-gender communication dynamics force you to sit down and shut up. As Dr. Reeves puts it, “We cannot talk about women’s retention, advancement and leadership in the workplace without exploring what happens when women are constantly interrupted. If women cannot even be heard, how can they advance into leadership?”

A lot of men regard these research findings as gender slander, claiming that manterruption doesn’t happen at all, doesn’t happen much, or is simply a cost of doing business in a competitive, power-oriented professional environment. Many not only deny intentional power-tripping; they refuse even to accept that they may have unexamined gender biases. Predictably, the loudest protesters are often the greatest sinners.

On the other hand, we’ve also heard from many lawyers confirming that it is important to shine a light on a common and significant problem that all too often gets swept under the rug. A particularly compelling response to our blog posts about manterruption came from a male BigLaw practice group leader:

My daughter, an associate in another firm... said [our posts] captured exactly what women commonly experience in her firm. My reaction was, “Nah, this can’t be. I guess this is the new hot topic for feminists to spout off about.” However, I did start observing gender interactions in my firm more carefully. At the next few practice group meetings I kept tabs on the interactions and interruptions. The results were sobering, because they revealed levels of ‘manterruption’ and ‘bropropriation’ far worse than those the social researchers noted in their interviews.

So Do Something!

The manterruption problem will not be solved simply by outing it in scholarly research. As one forthright female litigator so aptly put it, “Let’s cut out all the apologist crap about intentions and attitudes. For both men and women, we need to focus on behavior change—on what must be expected, accepted, or rejected in a professional marketplace.”

Behavior modification focuses on creating powerful incentives for appropriate behavior, as well as sanctions for bad acts. Bland injunctions like “men need to talk less and listen more,” or “women at the table need to lean in more,” won’t significantly and lastingly alter anyone’s behavior. Conversational parity is a matter of learned behaviors—techniques that can be learned, practiced, and reinforced by reward incentives or extinguished by some form of pain.

Sheryl Sandberg has some practical suggestions for curbing manterruption and bropropriation, to which we have added a few ingredients of our own:

For Both Genders:

1. **Get Honest:** Own up to the fact that unconscious bias and communication role stereotyping exists in men and women.
2. **Ban Bad Behavior:** Create a “no jerk” rule that explicitly addresses interruption and gives the group authority to call out and sanction unacceptable behavior.
3. **Intervene Actively, Particularly If You Are a Powerful Partner:** Stop interrupters *in the moment*. Hold up your hands in a “stop!” gesture and speak up: “Wait, please let her finish,” or, “Hold it, I really want to hear what Donna is saying.” Rehearse some good interrupt-the-interrupter phrases, and have them locked and loaded.
4. **Applaud:** As soon as a woman makes an insightful comment, jump in: “Yes! Good idea, Sandra.” (Don’t forget to say her name; name recognition goes with respect.)

For Women, and Younger Female Lawyers in Particular:

5. **Enlist a Male Buddy:** Find a sympathetic male who realizes how you’re being systematically shut out (or who can proactively protect you from such behavior) and make a clandestine pact: ask him to backstop you in meetings, i.e. nodding, agreeing, and calling out male interrupters as needed.
6. **Defend Other Women:** Women are shockingly unsupportive of other women publicly. Stand up for female colleagues and force the interrupters to confront more than one of you.
7. **Practice Power Postures:** It means to study *and practice* gestures that convey confidence and authority, including developing a “hold that thought” hand gesture to stop interrupters before they gain momentum.
8. **Eschew Conditional Statements:** Dispense with “Maybe I’m wrong, but…” or “Should we consider this?” Don’t use questions to make statements; *make statements*. Minimize questions designed only to signal how consensus-oriented you are.
9. **Find Your Voice:** Don’t try to talk like a man. Talk like a strong woman: No uptalk (interrogatory inflection). Use short sentences. Give inspiring speeches to yourself in the car (including practicing being angry or offended). Join Toastmasters or take a public speaking course if your voice is soft or your manner demure.
10. **Name the Frame:** Politely but firmly call out manterrupters and bropropriators as soon as they trespass, emphasizing their *behavior* but not impugning their *intentions*: “Gary, I’m being

cut short here. Please let me complete my thought.” “Mel, I’m glad you like my idea. You’ve paraphrased my previous comments very succinctly.”

About the Authors



***Pam Woldow** (left) is a principal and the general counsel of Legal Leadership. **Doug Richardson** (right) heads a Pennsylvania-based executive coaching practice for lawyers. Follow Pam on Twitter @[pwoldow](#) and Doug @[DBRCoach](#).*