

Institutional Barriers and Their Effects

How can I talk to colleagues about these issues?

What are institutional barriers (IBs)?

- IBs are policies, procedures, or situations that systematically disadvantage certain groups of people.
- IBs exist in any majority-minority group context. When an initial population is fairly similar (e.g., in male-dominated professions), systems naturally emerge to meet the needs of this population. If these systems do not change with the times, they can inhibit the success of new members with different needs.



• IBs often seem natural or “just the way things are around here.”

What are some examples of IBs?

- Assigning valued or important job tasks using criteria that favor certain groups (e.g., *is in the office later at night, doesn't have children; placing a higher value on stereotypically “masculine” tasks and/or assigning these to men more often*)
- Making decisions or having important conversations in informal situations where some employees find it more difficult to participate (e.g., *golf course, bar*)
- Rigid schedules that make managing family (or other) responsibilities difficult – especially when these responsibilities tend to fall more heavily on certain groups (e.g., *women*)

Why are IBs a problem for organizations?

Because institutional barriers seem natural, they are difficult to detect. Instead, individuals are blamed for failures or difficulties that actually result from these barriers. These individuals are seen as needing “special” help or “accommodations”; however, these “accommodations” would most likely have been *norms* had these individuals been part of the original culture. Failing to recognize and address these systems leads to increased employee turnover and hinders company productivity, innovation, and competitiveness.



It's About Systems Not Individuals

Common misperceptions and how to respond

Institutional barriers (IBs) are NOT about blame.

Stress that identifying institutional barriers is NOT about finding fault or ill intent. Institutional barriers naturally arise and need to be addressed in almost all majority-minority situations. Using a problem-solving approach can avoid a defensive reaction, especially when evidence is presented.



IBs are NOT the same as individual bias.

Explain that simply removing individual prejudice or bias will not level the playing field. Organizations must actively dismantle systems that seem natural but continue to disadvantage certain groups.



IBs are NOT simply the result of individual “choices.”

This view is sometimes reflected in comments such as “Most women I know prefer or choose to spend more time with the children.” Point out that “choice” is a relative term; women often make these “choices” because they have few or no alternatives. When men share family responsibilities equally, women frequently make different “choices.” Organizations can develop systems that address these problems, allowing them to benefit from diverse participation.

Addressing IBs benefits everyone. Large-scale research shows that men and women differ less than what is popularly believed in their attitudes toward and preferences for work-life balance.* Flexible work programs allow men to accomplish their own goals of spending time with their families. Remind colleagues that removing institutional barriers also benefits all of an organization's members, not just the minority group.

*Families and Work Institute. (2008) Times are changing: Gender and generation at work and at home. Available at <http://familiesandwork.org/site/newsroom/releases/timeschanging-release.html>.

