

PowerPost

How a White House women's office strategy went viral

By [Juliet Eilperin](#)

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As a national political reporter, I'm not really in the business of writing "how to" guides. But when it came to a story about how women have learned to navigate challenging terrain at the White House, that's exactly what happened.

A few months ago, my colleagues and I sat around discussing how we could write about the White House for our "[Women in Power](#)" series in a less conventional way. Karen Tumulty had heard from a former Obama administration official that things were so tough for women to exert influence during the president's first term that they devised a strategy called "amplification" to hammer across one another's points during meetings. After one woman offered an idea, if it wasn't acknowledged, another woman would repeat it and give her colleague credit for suggesting it.

The comment was off the record; it took several other conversations to confirm it with multiple former White House officials. I had the start to [my story](#).

But what I wasn't prepared for was this: Once I shared this approach in a report in mid-September, women in Washington and in communities across the country decided to adopt it as their own.

One reader emailed me to explain how she discussed it with several friends in her home — an eclectic group of Washingtonians that included a commercial airline pilot. A rock band in town devoted part of its practice session to kibitz about it.

At the Internet Association's annual conference in Menlo Park, Calif., on Oct. 11, New York Times reporter [Cecilia Kang](#) asked Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg [what she thought](#) about the "amplification" strategy, to which she replied, "Oh, it's huge."

An employee at one progressive nonprofit group emailed a female colleague to say, "I'm game if you are," and they've tried out this echoing technique in a few meetings.

That employee — I'm not identifying her to ensure there aren't any negative professional repercussions — works in an office where her boss often interrupts her during their regular senior staff meeting.

"He really defines the tone and tenor of senior staff meetings, on his own terms," she said. "The most frustrating thing about it is he doesn't recognize it at all."

Jessica Bennett, author of the new book, “[Feminist Fight Club: An Office Survival Manual \(For a Sexist Workplace\)](#)” said in an email that everything from straightforward discrimination to “very unconscious biases” account for why these coping mechanisms are being used.

“Since the dawn of time, we’ve been taught that it is men who lead and women who nurture — and so our workplace structures, our belief systems, even our expectations are still very much rooted in that belief,” Bennett said. “No matter how progressive we may think of ourselves in 2016, I think most of us still define leadership in male terms.”

And while the workplace climate at the White House has changed significantly since the first term, a [new study](#) from the liberal think tank New America highlights the extent to which some structural barriers still remain there. In its report “Not Secondary but Central: Securing Gender in the Mainstream,” the group commissioned in-depth interviews with a dozen national security and foreign policy experts.

Both the National Security Council and the Pentagon have launched initiatives to promote diversity within their ranks, but one of the report’s interviewees made it clear there was a limit to these changes: “You can’t talk about maternity leave in the context of the NSC. You either don’t take the job or you don’t get pregnant.”

Of course, some Washington institutions have proved that they can change pretty dramatically when they decide to do it. In 1980, 3 percent of the Inter-American Development Bank’s senior professionals were female. By 2005, that share had risen to 25 percent, but five years later, it only increased to 28 percent.

“That is when our shareholders said to us, ‘Make that 40 percent,’” said the bank’s executive vice president, Julie Katzman.

Officials looked internally and determined that their female employees were being promoted at lower rates. They established an “emerging women leaders” training program in which they taught leadership skills and practices, such as the value of networking.

The IDB came close to reaching its goal: By 2015, 38 percent of its senior professionals were women, and those who had been through the training program were promoted at higher rates than those who hadn’t. The bank is now expanding this program to the countries with which it works in Latin America, starting with the Dominican Republic.

During a recent office training session, Katzman referred to my report.

“We made sure they heard that story, and so they know what to do when they see someone try to do that to a woman,” she said, that the bank is enlisting men as well in women in addressing this issue. “On the


one hand, we want to give voice to women. But on the other hand, we want to make sure men have the skill to listen and to hear.”

And perhaps “amplification” will eventually become yet another obsolete workplace tradition — just like mimeograph machines — in the White House and everywhere else, for that matter.

 **9 Comments**

Juliet Eilperin



Juliet Eilperin is The Washington Post's senior national affairs correspondent, covering how the new administration is transforming a range of U.S. policies and the federal government itself. She is the author of two books — one on sharks and another on Congress, not to be confused with each other — and has worked for The Post since 1998. [Follow](#) 

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