

SEVEN SELECTED STRATEGIES TO DEAL WITH A CHILLY CLIMATE WHEN YOU ARE THE OBJECT OF THE OFFENSIVE BEHAVIOR

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Types of Strategies: Individual interpersonal strategies are typically aimed at changing one or more individuals' behavior. The strategies described below are not organizational strategies aimed at changing the institution systemically. Not all of these strategies are appropriate for every type of behavior or for every person to use. Individuals will want to choose the type of strategy that feels most comfortable to them.

Ignoring the Behavior is certainly one strategy, but if you ignore the behavior in the hope that it will go away, you need to know that it won't. If you ignore bad behavior, people think you don't care about it, you like it, or you are too weak to stop it. It is all right to ignore some behaviors, however, as long as you recognize that it is not a viable strategy to stop those behaviors. Additionally, you may not want to respond to everything that happens to you. I have heard about a case of one woman who was in a pervasively bad situation gave herself a quota of responding to nasty behavior only once a week.

Some of the strategies described below are useful for a variety of situations including sexual harassment or other types of negative behavior.

1. Talk to other people. Sometimes it is helpful to find out if what happened to you is unusual or common, such as whether Joe gets angry at everyone, or just at women and members of other underrepresented groups, or just at you. Other people can be helpful in giving you advice or other options you might pursue.

Sometimes it is useful to talk not only to other women but also to men who are familiar with the problem (or should know about it), as in the case of someone making sexist jokes at committee meetings. The strategy here is to **engage others as allies by asking for advice** from those people (often, but not always, men) who are possibly in a position to intervene or evaluate the other person's behavior. You might describe the problem and then ask what the person thinks might be helpful. Asking people for advice makes people not only feel good but also makes them "own" the problem; it makes them feel responsible for the problem, so that they are more likely to intervene, or not go along with the behavior, or judge you poorly for being treated badly by someone else. They are also more likely to be more sympathetic to what you are experiencing.

Remember, you don't have to take anyone's advice that you are not comfortable with; you just ask for it. Should the person put you on the spot and ask if you will follow the advice (most people don't), you can always say something about how you "need to think about it".

You can also talk to people whose official responsibility involves women and/or personnel issues, such as people on a committee on the status of women, an affirmative action officer, an

ombudsperson, or a human resources officer. They can often provide advice, and sometimes help resolve a bad situation informally.

2. Feign surprise:

I can't believe you said that!

Or, the Miss Manner's approach: *I beg your pardon!*

Coupled with strong facial expressions of surprise, this type of statement is a non-confrontational way of indicating displeasure. It is also often very useful to say when you are startled by bad behavior and can't think of anything else to say.

3. Feign ignorance and pretend to not understand. This is particularly useful with people who make sexist comments or tell demeaning jokes. You keep a deadpan expression and state that you don't get the point of the remark or joke or that you don't understand it. You follow up by asking the person to repeat whatever it is that they just said, and again claim that you don't understand what they mean. Another variant is to state that you don't see how the remark or joke is relevant to what you were discussing. There is nothing worse for a joke-teller or someone who thinks that he or she has just made a clever remark than to be told that someone "didn't get it."

Hopefully the other person will understand that their behavior is inappropriate, but even if they do not, they may not make any more similar remarks to you because they will assume that you have no sense of humor or are not responding to the "jokes" in the way they expected.

Pretending not to understand is also a useful response for illegal questions in an interview such as "When do you plan to have children?" You can be very straightforward – *I'm sorry – I don't understand how this is related to my doing the job.* Or you can deliberately "misunderstand" and say *Oh! Is this a test to see how I respond to illegal questions?*

4. Use humor: Sometimes when people are deliberately trying to get you upset and on the defensive, there is nothing that makes them madder than when you respond in a flippant way, which communicates that what they are doing is not going to work. Unfortunately, many of us think of clever responses after the situation, when it is too late. Here are some quick generic comebacks you can use in a variety of situations.

For example, if you are called a "Feminist" in a derogatory manner, or told you are politicizing your course, or in response to similar negative comments, for example, you can say: *Ah! You found me out!* Or you can say, *It will probably get worse.* Another response might be to gleefully state *I knew you were going to say that! I just predicted that to myself that you would say that!*

When sexist behavior occurs one might say—*Am I going to have to call the sexual harassment office about this!* Or, *Uh-Uh – that's a no-no – it's sexual harassment!* The idea is to say whatever you say in a joking way, but not in a sexually joking manner.

Remember that comments aimed at making you upset are not logical; they are emotional, and no amount of logic is going to change that person's mind. Defensiveness on your part may be reinforcing to them because that is the behavior they want to see; in contrast, the flippant remark does not reinforce their behavior, and helps to break the behavioral cycle of the person trying to make you angry.

5. Identify what the behavior is and be direct in explaining that it is offensive. Suggest what you want to have happen. Naming the offensive behavior insures that there is no mistake about what is troubling you, and what behavior you expect in the future. The letter described below in number 6 does something very similar but in writing.

This is the third time you put your arm around me. It makes me feel uncomfortable and I don't want you to continue doing that.

You've been calling me "sweetie" and "honey." You and I are going to be working together and I want you to call me by my name, Joan, not "sweetie" or "honey."

6. The letter: A very specific kind of letter was devised by Dr. Mary Rowe at MIT for use in employment sexual harassment situations, but it can be useful in almost any kind of situation where someone is acting badly and bothering you. In harassment situations it has been effective about 90 percent or more of the time.

The letter is written by the recipient of the bad behavior to the person who is behaving badly. The letter has three parts.

Part I. A factual description of what happened, without any evaluative words.

Last week at our staff meeting when I made the suggestion that we have a subcommittee, you ignored my suggestion, and did not say anything. A few minutes later when Paul made the same suggestion, you told him it was a very good idea, and decided to create the new subcommittee. There was no mention that I had made the identical suggestion earlier in the meeting. This has happened several times before when I have made a suggestion; someone else makes the same suggestion later and gets credit for it.

People usually agree with the facts, not with the feelings or the interpretation of the behavior. The letter deliberately separates the facts from the feelings.

Part II. This is what the writer feels about the experience.

I felt angry and as if I had been cheated out of getting credit for a good idea that was mine. I felt as if my ideas were not treated fairly. I felt very uncomfortable because I did not want to say anything publicly that would embarrass you or Paul.

In instances of sexual harassment someone might say things a little more strongly, such as, *When I look at you, my stomach is in knots and I feel very upset, or I want to throw up.*

Part III. Here the writer writes what she wants to have happen next. *I would like you to respond positively or negatively when I make a suggestion. If someone else later makes the same*

suggestion without giving me credit, I would like you to point out that I had made the same suggestion earlier in the meeting.

In sexual harassment the letter would be sent by certified mail, return receipt requested, but that might be overkill in this kind of situation.

What happens after the person reads the letter? Usually, nothing, except that the behavior stops. Occasionally someone wants to explain, defend or apologize; we tell people not to get involved in that kind of discussion other than perhaps briefly accept an apology and then simply say *we don't need to discuss it, I just want your behavior to stop.*

Why does the letter work? It gives the recipient a different view of how his or her behavior is viewed by others. It does not ask the recipient to do anything, such as apologize or to respond to the letter. It only asks that they stop the offending behavior. The letter will not work with a very aggressive or hostile person or when a group of people is all behaving badly (unless there is someone formally in charge of the group to whom the letter can be addressed).

7. The research ploy: This last suggestion – works especially well with recurring sexually harassing behavior. When you are harassed for the umpteenth time by a particular person, you turn around with a big smile and say, *I'm so glad you said that. I'm doing some research on sexual harassment and I wonder if you would answer some questions for me.* And then you whip out a notebook and your list of prepared questions such as the following:

How often do you do this?

How do you choose the person you harass?

Do you ever do this in groups?

Is this something you can talk about with your mother – your wife – your daughter? How old were you when you first did this?

(This suggestion comes from the DC Rape Crisis Center in Washington, D.C. If you use this technique and are asked about the research, you can state that you are doing it for my web site and then send me the responses.)

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