

# ON SEXISM



## Dealing with Disrespectful Dinosaurs

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**How can high-ranking women deal with disrespectful, old-fashioned male executives in their organization?**

Oh, boy. This is a question best explored with your favorite cup or glass of something strong, so pour away and put your feet up.

We all have our stories; Baby Boomers have their frame of reference, while Gens X and Y have their own perspectives. Yet inside each of our experiences, related evils lurk: general Neanderthal attitude, gender bias, and sexual harassment. Please share your experiences below in the comment

section ... as well as the actions you did or didn't take, and the results. Let's learn from each other and turn the tide of old-fashioned male disrespect in the workplace.

Note: This is not a male-bashing article. In fact, in my experience, most men today are respectful and some are even grateful women are in the work place. One more reason this is not a male-bashing rant: I love the male species!

Another Note: I'm not an attorney or an HR professional. I'm a Professional Coach so my toolbox contains curiosity, self-awareness, choice and

identifying resources. I'm also a woman and know the power of story connects women across time and space. So, I'll start with stories that move from mostly benign to dangerous, exercising curiosity, and end with possible actions and resources. Warning: some of these aren't pretty.

I'm from Texas, so I know all about "Bubba". I've been called honey, darlin', sweet-thing and the ickiest of all, baby, since I can remember by male store clerks, the postman, strangers holding the door open for me and gas station attendants.

I concluded in my early feminist years many Bubbas have an overachieving sense of what it means to be a gentleman or exercise chivalry. Often the unfortunate by-product is the use of unasked for terms of endearment. I admit I appreciate when someone taller than me, male or female, offers to place my carry-on bag in the plane's overhead bin. Just don't call me "little lady" or "baby" when you help me.

I encountered the malicious version of Bubba in the form of a CA legislator from Modesto, CA. The difference between a plain ole' Bubba and the malicious version is what they believe about and the attitude they take toward women.

As California grappled with proposition 209 (the repeal of affirmative action) I worked on the side of keeping affirmative action in place. I knew women whose businesses would be the first to suffer from not getting to bid on contracts, so it felt personal to me. In Sacramento, I was always sent to talk to the Republicans. I kind of look like one when I wear a red business suit and pearls. So there I was, young and idealistic, sitting in the lush, over-decorated office of Mr. Modesto, discussing the affirmative action issue from a woman's perspective, when he rolled his hooded eyes and asked,

"Are you married?"

"Excuse me?" I said.

"Are you married and do you have kids?" he asked, looking at me suspiciously over the top of his reading glasses.

"No sir, and, ..." I was interrupted.

"A girl like you not married and not having babies is malevolent."

I then received a southern Baptist style hell fire and brimstone speech.

Between malevolent, a woman's place and God, I interjected my talking points. Neither of us changed the other's mind. What I gained though is a deep appreciation for just how ugly gender bias can be, especially when it stems from an entrenched belief about what the role of women should be. I was clearly not following Mr. Modesto's rule of womanhood, therefore what I had to say was inconsequential.

If this is your kind of experience, I am so sorry. Feeling ineffective and unheard is demoralizing and infuriating. I had the luxury of never having to go into Mr. Modesto's office or deal with him again.

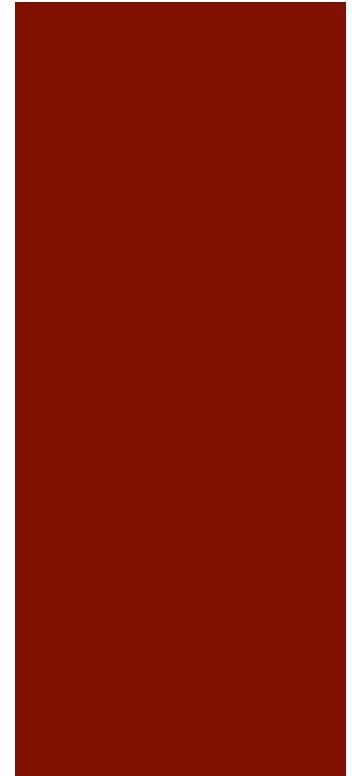
This next story ratchets up the ick factor. I'm a coach and have to

say, my colleagues are conscious, aware and mostly evolved (or evolving!). Yet even in this arena, a male colleague crossed the line. Out of the blue, he offered to get me into the Playboy mansion, like that was something I'd enjoy.

"No thanks," I said, repulsed from head to toe. A few months later, I received a package of paperwork in the mail from him. On top of the binder was a Xerox copy of the cover of a porn movie ... with "Cat Woman" in the title and a picture of a scantily clad dominatrix wielding a whip.

I went ballistic on him and he denied the obvious demeaning message, saying it was a joke. I asked others to mediate our next conversation. Not until he offended about 10 other women was he asked to leave my community of colleagues. Fortunately, I did not have to deal with him directly in my daily work nor did he provide my income. I have to confess I still carry irritation that my complaint wasn't the first *and* last in my community.

If the nature of the disrespect you are dealing with is sexual in tone, I am so sorry. I ask – do you call this sort of thing sexual harassment? My lewd colleague wasn't in control of purse strings, but made me so uncomfortable I didn't want to attend events I thought he might attend.



In the home away from home we call work, how you deal with disrespectful, old-fashioned male executives depends on a few factors. The thing to always do is track the instances of disrespect, including date, time and noting any witnesses.

Also note if you bear witness to similar disrespect shown to other women in your office.

1. Does the old-fashioned male executive have the power to promote or fire you? Is the nature of disrespect sexual in tone? If not, and you feel comfortable and safe to speak directly with the offender, I say do it.

First, get curious. What do you want to experience in this relationship? (Ease, lightness, trust, respect, etc.) What words and actions of his make you feel the opposite? Now you have your talking points. Tell him how his behavior comes across. Give specific examples. It is alarming to me how many people are clueless about their impact on others. Sometimes all that is needed is a quick conversation and once someone has a clue, things can improve. If nothing changes, talk to HR and get their recommendation and support. (You may want to include HR from the start.)

2. If the old-fashioned male executive does have the power to

promote or fire you, and/or if the disrespect is sexual in tone, tracking the instances with specifics is especially important. Next, think about your company's culture. How does feedback work? What is the complaint process with HR? As a general rule, I prefer to deal directly, however, in cases where legality and my job may be at stake, I think it is wise to get support from HR. There may be other women experiencing the same thing and the more complaints filed, the more ammunition HR has to address the problem. At the very least, they can't ignore specifics.

3. What if the nature of disrespect is outright sexual harassment? For anyone old enough to remember the Anita Hill / Clarence Thomas hearings, even though the law is on your side, you know the burden of proof is up to you and it can get nasty. The size of the organization you work in may factor into your decision on how to proceed. What does your company have in place to protect workers from sexual harassment? Do you need to consult or hire your own attorney or is your HR department big enough to handle the case internally without bias?

Here's a hard truth. Bubbas stay Bubbas because we don't always do a great job of calling out the

unacceptable nature of their language and behavior. Now, before you think I'm blaming any woman who is subjected to any form of disrespect, think again. In writing this article I have re-examined all the times I've felt the heat of disrespect and took no action ... the college theatre professor who offered me a star role for sexual favors (I switched colleges) ... the politician I worked for who invited me to an election party which turned out to be a party for two (I left), ... the *many* casting couches offered me during auditions in Hollywood (I stormed out).

My biggest regret is that I did not report the college professor and have been plagued by the

question, how many other young women did he make that offer to, and how many didn't have the self worth to say no? I wish I'd had the experience I do today because I would have requested his dismissal. So yes, I confess, I have sometimes let Bubbas be Bubbas and not blown the whistle on abusers. Why? I bet the answer is the same for all of us - it just seems easier when we're tired, scared or embarrassed.

Now, it's your turn. Please share your stories and how you handled the disrespect.

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