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“

I enjoy everything about the list, from the job queries to the recommendations for plumbers, nannies and manicurists!

-- MaryJo

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Wise Women Speak

February 2005 - **It's a Man's World. Or is it?**

By: Vica Vinogradova, VP, Corporate Communications, DataArt

Are you the only woman in an all-male company? Some women struggle daily to prove that they are a 'worthy' player. So, is being a woman still an obstacle to building a career in fields dominated by men? I have discovered advice worth sharing that might help turn your male-driven environment in to a personal career success.

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It's a Man's World. Or is it?

Most of us like to think of ourselves as strong, well-educated, open-minded professionals (women professionals that is). We are also aware that being a woman often brings a whole other level of complexity to our professional lives. While we might feel rather well adjusted overall, what do you do if you are practically the only woman in an all-male field (IT, stock market, scientific research, "GI Jane")?

Being the only woman in an all-male headquarters of an IT company, I haven't had any issues with my colleagues, but fuelled by recent statements by the president of Harvard University (women and science don't mix) I decided to find out first hand: is being a woman still an obstacle to building a career in a field that requires analytical thinking?

I spoke to women, who work in software development, real estate, law and finance, and talked to men who run big businesses, including hedge funds and IT companies. The goal was to determine what it takes for a woman to thrive in an all male environment (we are not talking sexual favors), and I made discoveries that are worth sharing.

Personally, I thought the male/female debate in the working place was a thing of the past. Maybe I got lucky to have smart bosses and colleagues, maybe I found exceptional people to work with. Even though I did feel patronized or condescended every once in a while (at previous companies), I always attributed it to the seniority (as in age) of my bosses, not their arrogance. Please note that I don't endorse the war of the sexes - it was sheer curiosity that made me study the subject.

As it turned out, even in the company I currently work for and admire for the democratic management style, there are some issues for women - all 10 of them (out of 160 employees). When it comes to software development, men look down on women, even though women excel at quality assurance and testing-as they are patient and detail oriented. It took years for a woman to be voted the best 'employee of the month' (Research & Development group), despite numerous past nominations. How did she do it? "I concentrated on the tasks at hand", said the Q/A engineer. "I never implied that my load should be less or that I should be entitled to special attention. I was simply good at what I did - and they finally noticed it." This is at an IT company. Now, let's look at the stock exchange.

Did you notice that there are mostly men on the trading floor? Do you think it's because women can't handle the stress or are unable to make quick decisions? Wrong. The answer came from a president of one of New York hedge funds. "The trading floor is a game for the initiated. All transactions are executed through nuances - a nod, a blink, an eye movement. How do you exclude women from the game - you simply don't look at them at the time of a possible trade. They lose transactions, and they are pushed out of the floor eventually". Unfair? Yes. Is there a way to change an attitude of a man towards a female colleague? Yes.

I asked the head of our R&D office to explain why the situation is what it is and was stunned by the logic of his answer. We simply need to understand how businessmen think and ignore how we feel, and then the battle of the sexes at the office is almost over. So how does a male boss think of a female employee in a mostly male company?

When it comes to hiring or working with a woman in any male dominated business, she is generally perceived as a minority.

The minority thinks differently from the majority.

This means more risks for the business owners who are generally risk averse.

That's it.

It's not about being a woman; it's not about having to take care of children or wearing skirts. It's about minimizing risks. So, when in an all-male company, I have learned that we should try and establish ourselves as risk-free or a low risk entity. How do we do this?

- First of all, don't "shop" for a personal companion at work (at least initially) - many men think that a woman comes to work for an all-male company to find a husband. While that indeed might be your goal, don't get too personal at work: your colleagues won't take you seriously professionally, and your boss will see you as a distraction.
- Don't "dress for success" in such a way that it distracts men from their work. While tight clothes and short skirts are sexy, and I am all for it, many men can't think straight in such situations, and eventually your boss will perceive you as a risk factor. It doesn't mean you shouldn't be stylish. It means you shouldn't be "loud" when you are the only woman in an office full of men.
- Don't ask for special attention because you are a woman, but make your opinions heard - despite being a minority. Try to think as a man (constructive solutions vs. "destructive" emotions) to get your point across.
- Be prepared to defend your points based on logic, not emotions. This is one of the most important points to take home. Men are bad with emotions - period. They are even less capable of dealing with them at work: they become confused, frustrated and negative, all because they don't know what to do in such situations.
- Take your time before addressing important issues. Write your thoughts down, rehearse - anything to stay cool if you want to get your professional opinion heard (it's actually vital in an all-female organization too).

Finally, after you have established yourself as a team member who is "just like them" and earned the respect of your male colleagues, you will be pleasantly surprised by their support.

Once they stop perceiving you as a risk factor or a "different species", the men will in fact readily offer their professional help, show greater respect and even treasure you as their special team member. Why? You proved that you are as professional and tough as they are - "despite" being a woman, yet remaining a woman. Remember GI Jane?

About the author:

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