

## **The Sex Factor: What to do about Sexual Tension in the Workplace**

By Roxanne Rivera

Most women have experienced that moment: the meaningful glance with a male coworker, the electric charge when your arms “accidentally” brush each other, the long lunches we enjoy just a bit too much. Yes, men are men and women are women and from time to time we *do* have sexual feelings for each other. Just because we work with men on a professional basis doesn’t mean we suddenly become sexless, emotionless robots.

It would be foolish not to acknowledge the role that sex plays in the workplace, especially when women work in a company or industry dominated by men. As well-meaning as most employees are—and I do believe most men and women try to be on their “best behavior,” at least most of the time—sexual tension can creep in to the most professional work environment. (In fact, many would argue that an undercurrent of sexual tension exists within any male/female relationship; the movie *When Harry Met Sally* comes to mind!) However, when you establish personal and professional boundaries early on, you can keep sexual tension at work to a minimum.

First, realize that your attraction to a male coworker may not be sexual at all. It is perfectly normal to feel a connection to a member of the opposite sex that has nothing to do with physical attraction. As women in Male-Dominated Industries, we work with people with whom we share a common bond. It is not uncommon to feel an attraction based on similar interests and mutual respect. These are the traits we seek and find in our female friends, so why not in men as well? This kind of attraction is perfectly acceptable in MDIs and can even propel teamwork and group bonding.

Still, Freudian concepts still manage to creep into our culture and our jobs. His theories state that humans are only animals reacting to hormones and sexual impulses. He believed that any relationship between members of the opposite sex needed to be sexual in nature. (Perhaps he was a student of *When Harry Met Sally*!) Pop Culture has further perpetuated this belief, as shows like *ER* and *Grey’s Anatomy* portray and even glorify the

role sex plays in the workplace. While art does often imitate life, it doesn't mean that your job must be influenced by palpable sexual tension.

Regardless of whether Freud's dogma was wrong or right, you *do* have the ability to work with and "fraternize" with men without letting sex get in the way. Women *must* be the ones to set the tone for the professional relationship. By making boundaries known from the beginning, you can establish the model upon which the entire relationship will be based.

Here's one thing your mother probably told you that you can carve in stone and use as a desk paperweight: *Men usually go as far as women let them go.* By saying "No, we are not going to go there," from Day One, you set the tone and men have to stick to it. It is in your best interest to engage your colleagues in friendly yet professional relationships. At the same time you should assume the part of respectful subordinate with your supervisors. Above all, you want to appear professional and easy-going.

If you are serious about drawing the line between *appropriate* and *inappropriate* behavior at work, you may have to remain vigilant. Part of doing so may mean downplaying (or at least not over-accentuating) your figure. It is no secret that a woman with a nice body will attract a male coworker, in the same way that a handsome man may catch the eye of a fellow female employee. We're all guilty. But once again, you can control the situation. Don't dress provocatively at work. I am not saying that you shouldn't dress to flatter, but avoid outrageous displays of cleavage and leg. Don't wear your clothes too tight. Always remember that you are at work to work. Wearing unnecessarily sexy outfits can detract from that goal. They are distracting and make men respect you less and desire you more. Save your stilettos and short skirts for drinks after work when they are more appropriate.

If you are propositioned with an unwelcome sexual advance (and they should ALL be unwelcome at work), your most effective "deflection tool" is humor. You can laugh your way through almost any situation short of sexual assault. When a male colleague asks you out or makes an inappropriate advance you can easily laugh, clap him on the back and

say, “Oh Bill, you are such a prankster.” By deflecting the situation with humor you will not only get him off your back but you will also send him a loud and clear message that nothing will ever happen.

A less obvious way to curb sexual tension at work (at least on your part) is to keep your personal life fulfilling. It can be tempting to let your work swallow you whole, especially when you love your job. But if you make your job your life, you may unintentionally seek out romantic relationships from your pool of colleagues. This is a bad idea as it will split your focus and keep you from excelling at work. So try to continue dating and going out with friends you know outside of your job. It will help you keep your perspective level so you don't accidentally end up falling for a coworker.

Remember above all that there is a difference between sexual tension that distracts and prohibits workers from fulfilling their tasks and harmless flirtatious banter between the sexes at work. I am not trying to be so stringent that I insist you squelch all your natural impulses. It would be impossible (and, in my opinion, counterproductive) to completely eradicate that certain dynamic that exists between men and women. Just decide from the start where you need to draw the line and be sure that no matter what you do, never cross it. Just remember that there are consequences to *careless* actions and you may not be able to undo the damage of merging the boundaries between sex and work. Hopefully you will value your place in your company and your long history of hard work too much to ruin it. So draw a line in the sand and make your stand . . . and stand by your decision to deal with sexual tension in a mature and professional manner.