



Strategies for change:

Senior level woman describes exclusionary treatment

By Bobbi Mooney

In my work community, a large Fortune 500 company, the diversity dimensions on which I differ most are gender and personality type. I am a woman and I am introverted. These characteristics are consistently in the less dominant groups within my workplace population, particularly in leadership roles.

As a woman, I am comfortable with my gender. Because gender differences have the greatest impact on me at work, I decided to write about my experience as a senior woman leader in a large Fortune 500 company today.

As an American, working internationally in a global company also placed me in a third subordinate group. Sometimes my religion places me in an additional subordinate group. I agree with those who say there is a multiplicity phenomenon when it comes to diversity dimensions; they do not add up, but rather multiply in the face of exclusion.

Disclaimers

It is difficult to talk about what it is like being female in a male dominated society and workplace. I worry that both men and women will classify me as a "man basher". On the contrary, I like men. The male relationships with my father, brothers, husband, son, and many friends and colleagues are a wonderful part of my life. I have never felt I was the victim of viciously intentional discrimination or blatant sexual harassment.

Yet, as a collective group, the dominant male community has

consistently made me feel excluded, as if I could not be in their world without losing some integrity of my identity. It's a concern that both men and women will classify me as "unhappy with who I am." I love my femininity. I embrace it.

Yet, I often find myself implicitly and quietly

excusing or discounting my own feminine characteristics, or even emphasizing my "masculine" traits as I assimilate into my male dominant environment.

Finally, I dread the deeply emotional conversations that can occur when I can find no words to describe my feelings in my inept attempts to be understood — it is the ability to express and hear the expressions of deep emotions that is another typical gender difference. This difference itself places another barrier to effective communication and learning on the topic across levels.

Subtle discrimination of exclusion

Sometimes other women tell me they do not understand the big deal about gender diversity because they have never experienced blatant discrimination or prejudice in the workplace. Neither have I. What I have experienced, and still experience often, is the more subtle discrimination of exclusion.

My stories below tell the times I have felt excluded by being treated

differently or reacting differently because of my gender difference. I don't talk about these "little" stories to male colleagues very often. They can easily annoy men or reinforce the "here's another whining female

with petty complaints" image. And that only serves to further

alienate me from the community of men with whom I so much want to get along and be a part.

In isolation each story can seem very insignificant; however, the significance grows with the repetition. The stories don't happen occasionally. They happen every day. They accumulate in a cluttered corner of my mind where I sweep them into the pile labelled "repress or contemplate." It is the growth of that pile over years and years that begins to wear me down. It begins to make me accept things I don't want to accept because it isn't worth it to react. Repetition brings doubt. It begins to make me believe things about myself or my auxiliary group that I know are not true. It makes me question myself and gradually erodes my self-esteem.

Every once in awhile when the pile gets too high, the next story hits the apex of the pile at just the right angle to send it tumbling. When this happens the pile doesn't get smaller; the base simply widens.

At these times it is inexpressibly comforting to be near one of the men with whom I feel safe enough to

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discuss the stories, someone who can help shore up the base of the scattered pile again. These men who have gratefully provided that safety and the understanding that you can't always try to "fix" the stuff in the pile.

My stories

So here are the stories, the events or patterns that I experience.

- My ideas frequently get discounted by colleagues in meetings, only to be accepted when a man repeats them a few minutes later.

- I walk into meeting after meeting where other women

number zero to three. And I always count — whether there are 10 or 1,000 people — I count and track when there are enough women to feel naturally comfortable. The further I move up in the organization the more masculine the business meetings become.

- I avoid sitting by other women at business meetings when the ratios are low. I don't know why I do this, but it is common with other women also.

- I have lower self-confidence than most of my male colleagues and I've found this to be a common thread amongst women throughout my company and other companies. The good performers hide this but often say they still feel it inside. We consistently lose opportunities saying, "I'm not sure I can do that"

against men with less competence who are very confident they can do it.

- Throughout my career, I have over compensated job performance so that no one can possibly think that I'm not qualified for that job. Again, another common thread, particularly in leadership. I hate to hear "she got that job only because she's a woman" (yes, people really do say that, men and women alike.) So I want to remove all shadow of doubt and prove them wrong.

- Decisions do still seem to get made in the men's toilet on meeting breaks. Sometimes they are shared and sometimes not.

- Men tend to look past or over me when standing in a group.

- Even though my brain is normally wired to be analytical, I also possess a most reliable sense of intuition, a more feminine characteristic. My intuition rarely fails me in making good decisions so I trust it. After many years of marriage, my husband learned to trust it also. Male colleagues do not. Someday I hope my daughter's colleagues not only understand and trust her intuitive abilities, but seek them out.

- I still see personal questions about marital status and children during job interviews in countries outside of the U.S.A. which cause us to lose good women hires. Even though these questions are still legal in many countries, many women believe these questions reveal

outdated attitudes towards women in the company.

- I often say, and hear other women say, that it takes more energy for a woman to do the same job than a man. Though this could sound like we think more is required or expected, I feel that it comes from the extra energy drain. The energy drained from having to spend more time to get my ideas listened to or accepted, or emotionally processing the extra clutter that's going on in the background from the exclusion process.

- Women watch the ratios of men to women on leadership teams. Ratios matter to women in our company because it tells them the extent to which they are represented, or understood, by management. It also sets the level of ambition for any woman wanting to move up in the organization. Not every woman wants to be the first or only woman on an all-male leadership team because it is too hard to do alone. The impact on me personally as my leadership team ratios have risen, then fallen again, has been tremendous. When the numbers fall below about 3 women in total, or less than 25%, I feel much less positive about my effectiveness on the team because I feel outside of the team dynamics.

- I've noticed that women who tend to rise further in the ranks in our company and many other companies tend to be ones who stifle characteristics considered to be more feminine and emphasize their masculine behaviors. They talk

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louder, act more assertive/aggressive, compete harder, etc.

- In a 20-year career with over a dozen bosses, I have only had one female boss and only one male boss whose wife worked outside the home in a professional job. My male colleagues who have dual career marriages generally have a much greater understanding of gender issues in the workplace.

- Others have observed that men begin to understand women in the workplace better when their own daughters reach university age. My own appreciation of the fear of positive discrimination for white men increases as my son grows closer to adulthood.

- I've experienced the tendency that women do not do as well as men with professional networking or mentoring. We tend to ignore each other or compete rather than create supportive structures for one another. As a younger woman, I didn't find myself being taken in and cared for by experienced women or men in the same way the old boys network works. Now as a more experienced woman, I find it overwhelming to think of mentoring the large numbers of women who might want it. My attempts to initiate or even discuss more formal networks for women in our company outside of the United States have been difficult. Women have expressed a "fear" of being labelled as troublemakers if they do this. Thus we help perpetuate the systems ourselves.

- Several women outside of the U.S. have expressed that they could never even imagine having the courage to sit with our executives to discuss their feelings about being a woman in our company the way that American women have done.

- The exclusion behaviors within my company vary dramatically from country to country. For example, the exclusion I experienced in the United Kingdom as an expatriate in the late 90's are very similar to what I experienced in the early 80's in the U.S.

- When I recruit or talk to university age family/friends, women still question whether our company's and industry's poor reputation for progressive attitudes towards women in the workplace.

Uncomfortable or demeaned

I feel uncomfortable or demeaned when men:

- Relish in their wife's stereotypical shopping habits, collections or hobbies

- Put down their wife/mother/mother-in-law/etc. over something that is stereotypically female

- Are given the bill by the wait staff when I'm the one intending to pay

- Tell "dumb blonde" jokes
- Brag about their sexual prowess, tell sexual jokes or display girlie pinups around their desks

- Touch me if they don't know me very well

- Assume I will not "hold up" as well as them while travelling or working long hours, etc.

- Use sports and military analogies excessively

- Think the use of masculine terms (e.g.: manpower) is a petty matter (if words don't matter then why is it a big deal to change them?)

- Look to me to take meeting notes, book the taxi/restaurant, etc.

- Make reference to women belonging in the home

- Laughingly "apologize" for any of the above but continue to do it anyway.

Kudos to all the men who take the time and care to become more aware of language and behaviors that perpetuate exclusion. Women in the workplace have seen many changes in the last century and my company is often looked at as one of the diversity leaders. I celebrate those accomplishments. But my current experiences that continue into the 21st century remind me that exclusion in the workplace is still my foe that leaves me weary at the end of many days. ■

Bobbi Mooney is a senior level leader with a Fortune 500 company.

See related article: Practical things men executives can do to help women executives, by Bobbi Mooney (also published March, 2003).