



**Now
What Do I Say?**

**Practical
Workplace
Advice
for Younger
Women**



Anne Krook

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In memoriam
Marilyn Sibley Fries
1945–1995

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What Is This Book About, and Who Is It for?

NOT LONG AGO, a group of younger women came to me for advice about some trouble they were having in their workplace. A couple members of their team assumed they were all group assistants (an odd assumption, since there were none at that company) and asked them to do administrative tasks they did not ask their male colleagues to do. One or two other members of their team knew they weren't assistants, but asked them to do those administrative tasks for them anyway.

These women faced a common dilemma: like all good employees, they wanted to make sure the work got done, and they also wanted to be respected and treated like everyone else, but they didn't know what answers would help them accomplish both of those goals. Sometimes, by the time they figured out what to say, the right moment to say it had passed, and the missed opportunity exasperated them. Sometimes it was enough extra effort to engage with those remarks that they let them go, and then they felt guilty about not engaging. They were frustrated, not only with their colleagues' behavior but also with their own: by not having responses at hand, they felt they were allowing the behavior to continue. At the very least, they felt they had not done anything to try to stop it.

They came to talk to me, I later found out, for several reasons. I had a reputation for listening to younger women, and for taking their concerns about their workplace seriously. They knew I had had a variety of jobs in a variety of companies, from very large to mid-sized to tiny startup companies. They also were aware I had worked outside the corporate world, as a university professor and as a bartender, and that I served on the board of directors of a national nonprofit organization. Finally, they had heard that, when a problem arose for one of my teams, I had found something relevant for the group to read, got everyone a copy, and discussed it with them as part of solving the problem. In short, they expected that I would listen, have some advice for them, and provide guidance for follow-up.

We discussed their situation, and I gave them some advice about what to say, to whom, and when. Afterwards I went looking for something for

them to read: blogs, websites, Twitter streams, articles, books. I found surprisingly little tactical advice for women in the workplace trenches. There's plenty of excellent material on finding your ideal career, managing your career, and changing careers. There's also excellent advice for women on how to develop into and position themselves as senior leaders, of which Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* (Knopf, 2013) and the blog associated with it (www.leanin.org) is the best-known recent example. What I didn't find was much material that gave advice about what to do in the following situations, and others like them:

- ◆ A colleague asks you to order sandwiches for a meeting you aren't attending when that isn't part of your usual job.
- ◆ A colleague walks by your cubicle after a contentious meeting where the two of you have publicly disagreed and mumbles "Bitch!" loud enough for you to hear.
- ◆ A vendor, or sales representative, or supplier calls or comes by, and, when you ask about the product line, asks to see "the person I can talk to," incorrectly assuming that person is not you.

These kinds of interactions are common. Many younger women report routine interactions at work that, intentionally or unintentionally, question their authority, their competence, and their intelligence.¹ They report the strain those interactions put on them at work, and how that strain often extends into their home life. Above all, they want to know what they can do about it. I wrote this book to provide guidance for women facing day-to-day situations like these, especially for women in earlier stages of their working lives, to improve their daily interactions at a detailed level.

The bad news is that there are a lot of these sorts of interactions in many workplaces, and at least some of them almost everywhere; the good news is that there is something you can do about it. Most of the situations I discuss

1. There are too many distressing examples of younger women being treated poorly in the workplace even to think about giving a comprehensive overview. Here's one example from Silicon Valley: Lauren C. Williams, "Julie Ann Horvath's GitHub Departure Shows Silicon Valley Has More to Learn About Gender Equality," *ThinkProgress*, March 19, 2014, <http://thinkprogress.org/economy/2014/03/19/3416013/github-julie-ann-horvath-sexism/>.

are products of ignorance or thoughtlessness, albeit often deeply ingrained and socially supported by both men and women. There are people who have not encountered many women in their workplaces or fields, or they have encountered so few that they are awkward around them in work situations, however well-intentioned they may be. Some people forget what it is like to be early in one's career, without much experience and the confidence that comes from it. And sometimes people have bad days, or a run of bad days, at work or at home, and behave badly as a result. What all that means is that, in many cases, these interactions are addressable: many can be managed by fact-based responses, delivered with varying degrees of patience, persistence, intelligence, and humor. Others, unfortunately, cannot be handled in these ways, and some actually are badly motivated. I discuss tactics for addressing these.

In this book, I discuss interactions younger women often face in their workplaces, provide a range of responses that might be useful in the moment, and give some guidance about when and how to use them and what to do when the responses fail to help. More briefly, I also provide guidance for thinking through, in advance, how to react in support of your longer-term interests in the workplace, including what might help prevent these situations from arising in the first place, to the extent that you can. Finally, a short chapter provides guidelines for the planning that prevents women's home lives from unduly spilling over into their workplaces.

Note that in discussing these interactions, I don't assume the other person is male, though that is often the case. Certainly, it is more often male employees who assume, say, that younger women should perform administrative tasks. It is by no means true, however, that all male employees act that way and that no women employees do. The responses I give will work no matter the gender of the other person. That said, there are some situations that are overwhelmingly gender-specific, and I address those.

While the material in this book is most applicable for women working outside the home, the so-called paycheck workforce, some of it will apply to women in other situations: volunteering on committees in nonprofits, schools, and houses of worship; working on farms; working solo at a home-based business; attending school or some kind of training program. If you're in a working situation not covered here, you want to see your situation covered in more detail, or you have a question specific to your situation, please

e-mail me at book-feedback@annekrook.com and ask me to cover it in a future edition. I can't respond individually, owing to the volume of e-mail I get, but I read it all. Needless to say, if I do address your question in a future edition, all individually identifying details will be completely anonymized. I do this not only for everyone's privacy but also because a working lifetime has taught me that if it is happening to you, it is almost certainly happening to many others as well.

Broader changes that we would all like to see, which create workplaces where these situations do not arise in the first place, are not my main focus. I do believe, though, that the advice here will help women become more comfortable and confident by giving them some responses and options for their daily workplace interactions. The more women are confident and comfortable in their workplaces, the more likely we all are to achieve workplace environments that enable everyone to work productively together. Here, then, are those responses: whether, when, and how to make them, and what they are.