

# Don't let gender define a role

*Nadim Choudhury gives advice on how to deal with gender bias in the workplace, even if you are new to a job and worried about offending your boss*

**D**ear Nadim,

I want to reach out to you on a difficult matter. I've read your column over the past few years, so I thought this could be an appropriate avenue to explore a particularly thorny work issue that I'm facing.

I'm 25 years old and work as a newly qualified mortgage broker for a small practice in Surrey. I've been working there for the past six months and love the varied nature of my job. I work in a close-knit team of five and being a team player is important. My other colleagues are all male and very keen on sport.

While I have never experienced any open sexism, there have been occasions when my colleagues and manager have asked me to take on tasks that I feel should be shared by everyone. For example, I'm always asked to take notes in meetings while the two male trainees are never expected to do this. I've thought about just handing the notebook and pen to one of them, but I think they would resent it and that I would be viewed as awkward and snippy for doing it.

The reason I think that is because my boss, while supportive of my professional development, often takes a condescending tone towards me. He has openly said in meetings that I remind him of his daughter, who is of a similar age, and he often asks questions about my personal well-being. I would like to think that this is well-meaning, but I find it intrusive and he never asks my male colleagues personal questions. With them, he talks about rugby and football.

All of that said, I like my colleagues and I think I have positive working

relationships with them. I feel that they look out for me but I would rather not be treated as a delicate flower. There seems to be an over-zealous way of wanting to make sure I'm happy – almost like they are protecting me, but I'm not sure from what.

My mother is quite cynical about it. She thinks that this shows they don't see me as someone who will have a career in the industry and that if they did take me seriously, they would quickly stop being so 'nice'. She thinks I should look for another job as soon as I have gained enough experience to leave.

I've never felt that my gender has played a role in how people perceive me on a professional level before, but since joining this firm, I'm reminded of my gender every day. I do want to try to make a success of this job and think I'm at least as good as the other trainees and can be a real asset to the firm. And, if nothing else, I want to prove it to myself.

I want to ask you if this behaviour by my boss is normal. Should I raise it with him? Or will it come across as being negative and not being a team player? Your thoughts would be appreciated.

Hannah, 25, Surrey

**Hi Hannah,**

Thank you for getting in contact with me. First, I want to say that you are not alone. The behaviour you've described is very common and many of my female clients have described similar situations to me in coaching sessions.

Reading between the lines, your boss and your colleagues are – whether

consciously or not – taking advantage of your relative inexperience to promote quite a toxic environment. It's understandable that you are making excuses for your colleagues' behaviour. Young people, and young women in particular, are under pressure to fit in and be liked.

If nothing else, your boss has the power potentially to damage your career. But it is that power imbalance that should tell you there is an issue here. Such comments and behaviours – particularly when your fellow trainees are not exposed to them – can have a strong negative impact.

Here are my top tips on what you can do next.

- Be clear in your mind that the intention, however well-meaning, is negatively affecting your well-being. However 'good' the intention, it cannot be used to justify that negative effect. Be OK with not being OK with this.
- Unconscious bias exists in all of us – this has been true since the start of time. It is part of the reason why the UK has The Equality Act 2010, which legally protects people from discrimination in the workplace. I'm not suggesting that you should seek legal redress for the issues you face but I do think it's important for all of us to understand how bias plays out in the work environment. If nothing else, inclusive companies are more productive. The UK Commission for Employment and Skills says that making full use of women's skills could boost the UK economy by around 2% a year.
- With that in mind, try to communicate openly to your boss about how you feel. Ask him why



the other trainees shouldn't take a turn taking notes. Listen to his reaction. The question may make him uncomfortable but that is OK. Make sure that any questions you ask about this focus purely on work and on making the team as fair and productive as possible. It's likely he doesn't see his behaviour as discriminatory, since he seems to equate it with being kind and 'fatherly'.

- One of the challenges we face is that we judge people on the basis of stereotypes and those stereotypes often form our view of whether – at its most basic – that person is 'friend or foe'. [Some psychologists have examined stereotypes in terms of perceived 'warmth' and 'competence'](#). As you have seen, young women are often viewed as 'warm' (part of our group) but not very 'competent' (ie low status), which leads to the pigeon-holing that damages careers. In particular, it

“ **Your boss and your colleagues are taking advantage of your relative inexperience to promote quite a toxic working environment** ”

can lead to women being expected to take on a lot of 'emotional labour' that men, such as your fellow trainees, are allowed to dodge while they focus on being 'competent'.

- You should put forward ideas for a project that you can help lead. Be collaborative but don't be afraid to take credit for your own good work.
- Raise the issue with your colleagues, ask questions and be curious to learn more about their explanations. If they are open to learning and wanting to support you, most people will be willing to change.

- If you find that your colleagues are not minded to be fair, the best way forward may be to ensure that your dealings with them – and with the industry – are as professional as possible while you build up a profile that will get you into a better-run firm. ■



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