

Aunt Bossy: The Life Coach Your Mother Never Was

Written by Susan Murphy

Wednesday, 08 May 2013 08:01 - Last Updated Wednesday, 08 May 2013 08:53

Penthouse Office



Dear Aunt Bossy,

I have a problem most people would love to have. I am young, blonde, very good looking and built like a Penthouse Pet. I am also very smart, focused and hardworking. It is what it is. I lucked out in the gene department, and had loving parents who raised me to be a successful person.

I have just finished putting myself through law school and have interned at a top-notch firm whom I will join after I pass my bar at the end of the summer.

I act professionally; have good manners and people skills. I dress to downplay my "assets," but am not dowdy.

What can I do in this male-dominated industry to be certain I am taken seriously?

Dear PO,

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One of my favorite subjects. This may take the whole column this week.

Here is what you must never do:

1. Flirt.

Aunt Bossy is a bit long in the tooth. She can get away with flirting because young men, except for the dumb or deluded ones, know she is just being friendly and having fun. (I do have to say that "Cougertown" has put a damper on that by convincing metro-sexuals that when an older woman flirts with them that she "wants" them. Pathetic on both sides.) However, the beautiful and young who don't want to attract too much attention can't afford to go over the politely friendly line. Men can't handle it. They will convince themselves that their dreams have come true.

2. Act Girly.

You mustn't flip your hair, talk in a high voice, giggle, cry, or stand like Vanna White. Meet with a voice coach just to be certain you are making the best use of that feature.

3. Dress Girly.

You may not wear pastels, platform shoes, open-toed shoes, short or tight anything.

4. Come on Strong.

You should not try to prove you are tough by acting in an aggressive manner. Assertive works

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better for both men and women.

It sounds to me as though you already abide by those rules. So what should you do?

Be friendly but not familiar. Include everyone from the receptionist to the top partners. Listen. Ask, "What more can I do to make this better/easier/whatever?"

Do not try to prove how smart you are by finding problems or erecting obstacles. (Yes, I know you are a lawyer.) People will learn how smart you are by your hard work and uncomplaining attention to detail.

Choose your battles carefully. Always ask yourself, "Is this fight furthering my goal?"

Do not confuse casual flirting by a guy for being hit on. Practice responding to flirting by acting cheerful and stupid. Act as though you don't get it.

If a guy gets a bit too enthusiastic about you as a woman, put your hand up in the stop mode, use a pleasant tone and say, "You are making me uncomfortable." Then, immediately continue the conversation in a neutral tone. He will be grateful that you did not humiliate him and will become a supporter.

If a fellow crosses the line into harassment, call him on it. Tell him, "You are treading on some dangerous ground. Do yourself a favor and stop." No smiling this time. Be very sure he isn't just acting like an insecure oaf in the presence of the Queen.

If he does it again, report it in detail.

Learn how to say, "I'm sorry, that is unacceptable." Apply this to anything that is unacceptable

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from overloading you with work you shouldn't be doing or treating you as less than you are. Be sure you aren't searching out disrespect. Watch and see what is required of the guys. If you aren't sure, check with someone you respect in the firm and ask if things are within bounds.

Learn how to say "No." Many tell women never to apologize. Saying "No, I'm sorry I don't have time to do that right now" is not a sign of weakness. It is good manners. Try to follow that with an option. "I might be able to schedule that next week." Or "James might have time to help you with that." (Tell James before he gets hit with the request.)

Find a mentor. If there is a strong woman in the firm you admire, you could go to her for advice. You could also choose a fellow you trust and like, preferably one who will think of you as a daughter figure. Your success will be his goal. I think having a male mentor might be more valuable in that you and a female mentor might be seen as "the girls." Whoever you choose, don't approach that person and ask him or her to be your mentor. That is just too needy. Ask if she or he would be available to give you advice now and then since you want to do your very best and don't know all the ins and outs of the business world yet. You will get a mentor without looking like you need one.

Other random thoughts: Buy the best designer clothes you can. I get Armani black label on ebay, used, for a pittance. You can also shop Last Call and Off Fifth. Make sure you wear expensive shoes. Keep your nails short, clean and polished. If you wear perfume, make sure it is unique. You don't want to remind anyone of an ex-wife or hateful sister because of your scent. Keep it very light, and check with friends to be certain it can't be detected at a distance.

Do not put anything in your office that doesn't make you look smart, interesting, energetic and nice. If you are married be sure your husband's mug is a prominent feature, and pictures of your family send a priceless message. No one wants to mess with a gal who loves her mom and dad.

Line up emergency childcare if you have children, but take your whole maternity leave if you are having a baby.

Lastly, all the advice above is targeted toward you – a young, pretty, smart woman. It could also apply to anyone.

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We all spend way too much time in this grievance loving society worrying about who is discriminating against us and hugging the thorns. Think about it. Aren't the people you prefer to be around the ones who never openly consider that others might not like them, are out to get them, discriminate against them? If we got all the chips off the shoulders, we could build a fire to produce enough energy to light the planet.

Good luck. You sound just fine. I used your question as an opportunity to give advice to those who don't seem to have quite the handle on it that you do.

Let me know how you do.

P.S. Yes, all the straight men, and some of the gay, really do want to run away with you. Don't notice it.

Aunt Bossy is Susan Murphy, an internationally known Communication Skills Coach who adores spending every winter and spring in Beaufort. □ Ask for advice @ Bossymurph@mac.com

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