

More from Aunt Bossy

Written by Susan Murphy
Tuesday, 05 June 2012 13:22



Diverse and Perverse

Dear Aunt Bossy,

I know you work with people teaching them presentation methods, and I'd like your opinion. I work for an International Architecture Firm. I am an interior designer.

Recently my firm was preparing to present our services to obtain a contract to design a new library in a community in our town, which is heavily Hispanic. I, myself, am a 29-year-old Latina.

The firm brought in a consultant who supposedly specializes in helping firms prepare for the presentations. When she met the five white people who were going to the interview, she asked who was Hispanic and who spoke Spanish. When she heard that no one did, she insisted that they bring someone onto the team who did.

My boss asked me to join the team. I am completely qualified, but knew nothing about this

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project. He said that it didn't matter, that the consultant would brief me and, anyway, that the project was already going to another firm. We were only making an appearance so the town would be aware of us for future projects.

I joined the group working on presenting the Power Point presentation and the consultant told me what to say and how to say it. She was very condescending, telling me how well I was doing and that she felt like the director who had put Barbra Streisand on stage as an understudy. She wouldn't shut up about how great it was that I joined the team and how quickly I picked up on the presentation. She kept saying "A Star is Born," like I was a trained seal or something.

One of the guys asked her how they should dress and she went around the room telling everyone. When she got to me, she had the nerve to say that I should dress exactly the way I was dressed that day and that I should be sure to keep on the pearls I was wearing because they look so professional and ladylike. Like I wouldn't know how to dress if she hadn't told me.

She further humiliated me by telling my boss and his assistant how proud she was of the job I did that day.

I reported her to the Vice-President of Human Resources but got no answer from anyone. Three months later, I received a hand written letter from the consultant. (She didn't even take the time to type it) saying that she had no intention of disrespecting me. She said she thinks that it shows respect to a community to have a representative who shares the heritage. She went on and on about how our city is a city of neighborhoods and it is important to show you understand the cultures. She also said again how impressed she was with me, and other condescending remarks. At least she apologized, but I can tell she doesn't think she did anything wrong.

What should my next step be?

Sincerely Yours,

The Token Hispanic

Dear TH,

Your next step should be to review everything the consultant taught you and had you practice and continue doing that throughout your career if you don't derail it by looking for "injustice."

Unless this woman had a horrible tone of voice and smirk when she praised your work, it sounds as though every thing she said was correct. You should have been thrilled for the opportunity to shine in front of your presumably more experienced colleagues as well as the library board decision makers.

Just as we ask for the Supreme Court to "look like us," a presentation team should reflect the culture of the buyer as much as possible. It isn't as though you weren't qualified to be on the team. They didn't pull someone from the IT to pretend to be a designer. You should be honored that you were chosen and were coached by someone who appreciated your talent.

Stop searching for disrespect and hugging the thorns. Even if someone appears to disrespect you, ignore it unless it brings your life to a screeching halt.

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Here is a story that comes to mind: Condeleeza Rice came home from school one day and told her dad that someone had made a racial remark. His response? "Condeleeza, that has nothing to do with you." If she had clung to those remarks the way you are clinging to a perceived "dis," she would never have learned to play the piano, become a Russian scholar, much less become Secretary of State.

As for the hand-written note: That is what ladies do.

Good Guesting

Dear Aunt Bossy,

I have close friends with tons of money who invite me to visit their wonderful home on the Coast. I love to be there. It is so peaceful and luxurious. The only problem is that I only have a small studio apartment, which I think is very nice, but is so simple compared to theirs that I am not comfortable having them visit me.

Although I have a limited income, I bring nice hostess gifts. I also try to help when they entertain while I am there, but they have professional people who do those things better than I can.

What can I do to even out the playing field? I don't want to feel like I am not carrying my load?

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Poor but Eager

Dear Poor but Eager,

First of all, if your friends cared how much money you have, you would not be invited more than once. It must be a pleasure for them to have you there.

However, it doesn't feel good when a relationship is so uneven, so let's see what you can do.

Firstly, don't mention that you don't have extra money to entertain them, or that your apartment is too small for them to be guests. They know that.

Pay attention to what small things thrill your friends. If it is food, a small treat like a fabulous marmalade is a wonderful gift. One of my richest friends always brings that with a recipe for Baked Brie involving the jelly. Music? That is so easy. People love getting music that they don't know about, or a different version of something they already own and love. Movies are the same. A DVD is not expensive and shows that you really considered their taste. Flowers? A perfect bud is, well, perfect.

The secret is to do this randomly and regularly.

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The other way you can “sing for your supper” is to be a perfect guest. When they entertain, seek out the guest who takes a little more care, and spend time making that person feel important and valued. Mix things up to keep the gathering lively. When they aren't listening, say nice, and specific, things about your hosts and how nice it is to be part of their lives.

You mentioned they have help. Be certain you treat them well. Don't do anything to make their jobs more difficult. Pick up after yourself, work around their schedules. You may not be able to leave an envelope on your bed table with a hundred dollars and a note, but you can leave a note of appreciation.

If you live in an area your friends like to visit, you most certainly can invite them to stay at your place. Buy the soap you always wanted, pick up deluxe linens at TJ Maxx (you should have them anyway) and make sure your place is spotless and smells good. Leave breakfast goodies for them, and go stay with another friend for the time they are in your place. It might be a romantic adventure for them to live like the “other half” for a couple of days.

A rich friend of mine once told me she didn't hang out with people without money because she liked to do things that they couldn't afford and she didn't want to make them feel bad by paying. If these friends do take you places and spend money on you, do them a favor by accepting it with grace. They wouldn't include you if it weren't a treat to have you around.

We all have wealth. Yours might not be in cold cash, but you can add to the friendship account by giving generously of your spirit and imagination.

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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