

Tools for Success

Chapter 3: What's a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Place Like This?

Working in a Traditionally Male Environment

The construction industry is traditionally male dominated and sexist attitudes are unfortunately still all too common on the jobsite. Your presence and your work will be a problem for some men. They may make belittling comments, check your work constantly, or act surprised when you've done a good job. They may also be more aggressive. Tradeswomen say they've been threatened with physical harm, have had their work sabotaged and have been placed in dangerous situations by co-workers.

Unfortunately, you may have to cope with more than sexism. Women of color encounter racism, and both lesbian and heterosexual women say they hear hateful language about lesbians. While the goal of tradeswomen's organizations and the individual tradeswomen who demonstrate every day that women can do this work, is to eliminate discrimination, there are many considerations that go into each woman's decision about how to deal with situations that arise on the job site. If you are working with someone displaying sexist attitudes, you may need to determine case by case whether it is worth it to you to confront it head-on or whether some other strategy, including ignoring it, might be just as effective and less disruptive to your work/life.

Support Groups

Some tradeswomen rely on informal support groups; they meet with other tradeswomen for dinner once a month, call tradeswomen friends regularly or belong to an on-line mentorship site. Others take part in more formal support groups organized by tradeswomen's organizations or by fellow union members.

If you are in a formal group, remember these basic principles:

- 1) *Listen carefully; don't just wait for our own time to speak.***
- 2) *Don't pass judgment of what people say.***
- 3) *Make sure that everyone understands that what is said in the group is confidential***
- 4) *Make sure that everyone has a chance to participate.***
- 5) *Make sure your group is a welcoming place for all tradeswomen***

Whether your support groups is formal or informal, you can use it to break the isolation of working in a traditionally male environment. As a tradeswoman you may sometimes be the only woman on a site, working alone, and sometimes taking breaks and eating lunch alone. If this is difficult for you, a support group can help.

A support group can also be a place where people will understand why you're in the trades. Other tradeswomen will share your love of the physical work, and they'll understand that you could never sit a

desk all day long. You'll be able to share stories about your work that no one else understands. you'll also get information about finding and keeping jobs, preparing physically and mentally for your work, what kind of clothes to wear and where to find them in your size.

Finally, support groups will give you a chance to talk about the difficulties you may encounter on the job. Most tradeswomen find it best to be unemotional on the job. Almost everyone says, "Never let them see you sweat." However, you'll still need an outlet away from work for the strong feelings you may have.

Developing Your Own Strategy

Often, you may find you need more than a support group to cope on the job. You're also going to need a strategy to handle unpleasant remarks and incidents as they occur. This strategy has to be your own, and it may be very different from the strategies of other, equally successful tradeswomen. It's best to think out how to react before an incident occurs. Some tradeswomen write their answers to offensive remarks in the notebooks they keep in their lunchboxes or pickets and practice these answers with other tradeswomen or with their support groups.

As a coping strategy some tradeswomen are quiet and reserved:

"I'm not friendly - I just do what I'm told to do. I get the respect that I give. Different women encounter different things, but I do feel like you go in with a certain attitude - not that you're one of the guys, or take all the crap they're going to pile on you - you go and try to fit in. For the most part, you can get by."

Others are very outgoing and open:

"I'm a first year apprentice, and everybody knows me. The general contractor, every boss that comes down there knows me, because I just let everybody know where I stand. If you don't like it, my attitude is, then fire me. I don't expect you to change; don't expect me to change. I'm gonna do what I'm gonna do, you're gonna do what you're gonna do."

Some tradeswomen ignore a lot of the negative things that go on:

"The naked pictures on the wall, instead of complaining about them, don't look at them. You have to bite your tongue sometimes."

Some women try to understand that they're entering what has been a man's world for a long time:

"We're breaking into their world. If we say, 'Don't say this, don't say that,' they will never accept us, they'll always resent us. I don't try to change them. They can have any book on the table they want, just don't put it in my face. I let them be them and I'm me. Instead of trying to change them, you try to gain their respect as a person, then a woman. There are problems any person would have on a job. I have problems, not because I'm a woman or because I'm black, but because they're just jerks. It's nothing toward me."

Others try to fit in on their own terms:

"You should just be yourself. you don't have to act like a guy. You're a lady. I wear my makeup." I'm a lady; I went on the job as a lady, and I left as a lady. You have to be very strong minded to keep your dignity. But I was out there to work, and they knew it."

"It's a fine line between being accepted on your crew, and being one of the "guys". No one ever forgets that we are women. I try to dress and act in a way that reads like I'm there to be taken seriously and to work. Period. I'm friendly with everyone but I try to just shut down the conversation or personal questions when it gets inappropriate. No apologizing, just "what the hell joe, that's none of your damn business" and you can usually laugh it off."

Some tradeswomen don't find the trades to be all that different from everyday life:

"Racism, sexism- they're not unique to the trades. These are world issues. It's not just the Polish guys, it's not just the Irish guys - It's a male thing. There are black men who don't want black women in the trades."

Both lesbians and heterosexual women encounter homophobia:

"One day this guy told me, 'A lot of guys are saying you're a lesbian because you don't date any of them.' I was shocked that they were saying that. At first I wanted to defend myself - to let everyone know that I'm not a lesbian. Then I thought about it- I didn't need to defend myself. I realized that they can think anything they want- I'm as gay as they think I am - and It's none of their business anyway."

"One guy asked me, 'are you gay?' I asked, 'Are you gay?'"

Many say you need a way to let off steam:

"When I was at the utility and they said terrible things to me, I was quiet. But my doctor said to me that this job was going to make me sick if didn't start opening up my mouth, so that's when I started swearing. There's a double standard. They don't think about what they say to you , but when you have a comeback, some of them get offended."

"I adapted a little phrase that one of the kids that we were training used to say, 'You'll get over it.' I started using the phrase and let the aggravation run off. You do have to find a way that t doesn't get stuck in there, because when it does, it really does eat at you. You have to let it roll."

Others caution not to let off steam prematurely, if at all:

"When I get upset I wait until things cool off. Then I go to talk to them."

"Women don't stick around because they're too involved in emotionalism. You can't get ahead by being emotional. You've got to have the sperm mentality that men do - that go-getter attitude. It's an uphill battle, up the canal. You've got to be the winner. A lot of them are trying to get up that canal and only

one's going to fertilize that egg, and you've got to decide you're going to be that one. You've got to be the winner, whether you're a man or a woman. That's the name of the game."

And some do nothing at all:

"Somebody will say to me, 'You're going to put up that drywall by yourself?' Sometimes I don't answer - I don't think they deserve a response. If I'm in a bad mood, I'll look straight through them."

Almost everyone says, "Never let them see you sweat":

"If someone says something that gets to me, I never let them know. Anybody who teases, once they find out they get to you, they don't stop."

"You've got to have a lot of balls - you can't let them break your spirit. You've got to be strong on the job. You can cry and kick the hell out of the door when you get home, but you've got to be strong on the job."