

The Joke's on Them: Five Ways to Diffuse Crude Behavior Without Being Viewed as a Prude

By Roxanne Rivera

So you're walking into a male colleague's office and you overhear him and a coworker yukking it up over a knee-slapper like, "*How can you tell if your wife is dead? The sex is the same but the dishes pile up!*" Quick, how do you react? If your first impulse is to a) pretend you didn't hear, b) explode with rage, or c) to run to Human Resources and file a complaint, it's time to learn the fine art of crude joke diffusion. There is a right way and a wrong way to deal with tasteless humor—and choosing the right way can make a huge difference in your career.

When you work in a male-dominated industry, chances are good that you will encounter a good amount of crude and crass behavior. Men often use tasteless humor to bond with each other, and the work environment is no exception. You may be tempted to accept their behavior and suffer silently or even try to become "one of the guys" and join in, but both are big mistakes. Option one makes you a victim and sends the message that crude behavior is okay, and option two is simply fruitless. No matter how you perceive their behavior, men will never really want you to be one of them and they will resent you for trying. (Luckily you can easily learn to occasionally *act* like one of the guys for the benefit of your career.)

Read on to discover five secret weapons that will allow you to diffuse crude male behavior, behave like a lady, and still fit in with the boys at work.

Secret Weapon #1: Humor. This is the easiest way to diffuse inappropriate male behavior. A friend of mine came upon a group of her male coworkers laughing and making lewd gestures in the office. The ringleader had no idea a woman had walked into the room and had witnessed the display. When he turned and saw her he immediately froze and turned red. My friend could have launched into a tirade or at least grimaced, but instead she burst into laughter...genuine laughter. By laughing she sent the message that she was easygoing without sending the message that their crassness was acceptable daily behavior. After all, the group didn't know she was within earshot. Her reaction said "Boys will be boys, and goofing around doesn't make you a bad person."

- **Secret Weapon #2: The Mother/Wife/Daughter Technique.** Men will often test a female coworker to see how much she can take. They may try to un-nerve you to get a rise out of you. If they begin to tell off-color jokes or become suggestive in your presence, you might use what I call the Mother/Wife/Daughter Technique. You can appeal to men's sensitivity by reminding them that they are in the company of a lady. Simply say, "I am sure your wife/mother/daughter would be disappointed to know that you're making a woman very uncomfortable right now with your behavior." It will do the trick and you will probably get an apology as well.

- **Secret Weapon #3: Sweetness.** If a man or a group of men make you uncomfortable by being inappropriately perverted, simply smile sweetly at them and say, "I would really appreciate it if we could get back to work now, thanks *gentlemen*." The sweet technique is probably the quickest solution to thwart tasteless humor in a male-dominated industry. Why? Because men in these occupations are accustomed to dealing with bold, aggressive and (ahem) *angry* women. By offering them a honeycomb rather than a sponge soaked in vinegar, your colleagues will not only stop offending you, they will respect you for not going into the tirade they may expect from you.

- **Secret Weapon #4: Directness.** In the previous example I suggested that you sweetly ask the man to stop his crass behavior in your presence. However, the other powerful aspect of this strategy involved your straightforward request to stop the action. You can even say, "You are a better person than that." Men respond exceedingly well to directness, whereas women often have trouble getting straight to the point. Not only will they respect you when you ask for what you want, but they will also respond more quickly because you are not sending confusing mixed messages. So be brave, be kind, and make eye contact and you will be surprised to discover how a few well-chosen words can go a very long way.

- **Secret Weapon #5: Shock Humor.** If all else fails you can occasionally—and I do mean *occasionally*—address crude behavior by giving men a taste of their own (tasteless) medicine. An engineer friend of mine was the only woman in a meeting when the men at the table brought up a discussion about women wearing clothing that accentuates their nipples. When one fellow chimed in with "I once saw a girl at the mall with three inch nipples," my friend replied "You know one time I was at the mall and I saw a man with a three inch penis." Needless to say the room became silent and the meeting quickly got back on the right track. But beware. Shock humor is tricky and should be used sparingly, if at all.

No matter what, remember that you deserve to work in an environment that promotes efficiency and professionalism. Unnecessary crude behavior is something you

shouldn't have to tolerate in excess. Just be sure you know where to draw the line between harmless quips and over the line tasteless offenses. While nobody ever died from a naughty limerick or two, you have every right to nip unacceptable lewdness in the bud. So be strong even if you feel outnumbered, and demand the respect that every lady deserves in the workplace.