

Working With Men in the Risk Environment

Hard hat and thick skin required

Liz Taylor is an internationally experienced Insurance Risk Practitioner known in both developed and emerging markets and to a wide variety of industry and public sector audiences.

Being a woman has advantages and disadvantages in the world of risk management, but how you play them depends on you and only you. Any woman in business, particularly one who is operating at senior level, has to maximise the advantages and minimise the disadvantages.

Emotion, pain and anger were always a hard thing to manage. So many times I had to blink back the tears or to hold my tongue. Doing risk management in a man's world never fazed me much, particularly in an industrial environment where you had to climb up the outside of ten story silos in a force-eight gale to inspect some piece of equipment. But when I got down, put the hair back in place, and tidied up the moisture marks under the eyes, I was told that it was a test, and that I was expected to back out of it. I just smiled and asked a technical question about the equipment. Underneath, I was seething.

On another occasion, as the new Risk Director, the board meeting was over, and everyone shuffled out. I popped to

the ladies to tidy myself up before the evening's dinner, and when I came out they had all gone. Not only had they failed to offer me a lift, but they had also neglected to tell me where they were going for a pre-dinner drink. So when I arrived at the dinner venue, I waited for over an hour and a half for the others to roll in, noting that they were rather the worse for drink. Did I scream and shout like I felt like doing? Of course I didn't. I just notched it up to another of those experiences when you feel hurt and betrayed beyond telling.

I was lucky, blessed with a physical size and strength that put me on a par with the smaller men and a cheery countenance that made me look on the bright side of things all the time. But I still felt moved to tears when I felt betrayed, or belittled by my



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male counterparts. However, never did I give them that satisfaction, rather reverting to quick quips or turning the conversation to something else.

Women's clothes, perfume and makeup were always a trial for me. There were no senior women from whom I could learn. Once, an HR director looked me up and down and gave me a heap of verbal abuse for wearing trousers. Yes, he did that, and I'll never forget looking him straight in the eye and asking if he would prefer that I minced around in a skirt and high heels on open meshed flooring in the factories. His jaw dropped.

I had learned my lesson a few months earlier, having been summoned at short notice to attend the site of an accident. I'd not stopped to get into my boiler suit and protective shoes, rather preferring to dash up to the factory floor some six stories high. It was a lovely flowing blue skirt that I wore.

I remember it clearly. There were pretty white polka dots and the skirt went everywhere with me, never showing a crease and always elegant and dressy.

When I descended the factory, the skirt was torn to shreds. I had been lucky that I'd not also been pulled into the compressor along with the skirt. But all I could think of was maintaining my composure and keeping a modicum of pride by winning the tug of war with the machine enough not to have to walk through the factory showing my unmentionables below the

smart white blouse. But on examining the skirt when I had the privacy to do so, it was ruined beyond hope. But I won that day. No-one saw and no one sensed my discomfort.

Whilst my female colleagues tended to have a wide range of clothes and wore something different to the office each day, I tended to stick to just two or three trusty outfits and cycle them through the week, slightly changing the accessories or mix. Having clothes that didn't crease, or show small stains were particularly useful if one had to attend site, put on a grimy hard hat, or jump into a dirty vehicle.

When working at a senior level, I learned pretty early that it was not a good thing to stress the difference between women and men. Amongst other experiences that one would rather forget was the one where a finance director leaned over to me and asked me what perfume I was wearing. The ensuing conversation resulted in his, for some strange reason, making abusive remarks about my husband. So I stopped wearing perfume. I also found that make-up soon blotched, ran or leaked onto a white shirt if the wind and rain had their evil way with your face. The maximum allowable was some waterproof mascara if anything.

Others' reactions often left me in wonder, particularly that of other senior women. I had made it to senior management quite early at the age of 31. My male colleagues by then had taught me to make jokes ruder than they could, to lack

surprise when faced with extreme nudity even pornography when showed into the male domains and to put up with extreme sexist behaviour with equanimity and guile without ever damaging one single man's ego.

It was at the National Conference of the Association of Insurance and Risk Managers when my top guest, the female President of the equivalent organisation in the USA tugged on my arm and said: **"Where are all the gals?"**

As the current Chairman of the association I'd been specifically told that I was not to make it a platform for feminist issues and so I'd not made any inroads into the balance of male to female membership. I turned to her and shrugged.

"We have 5 women for every 95 men" I responded. She looked at me in horror and said; **"Well how the **** did you get to be the President?"** I smiled sweetly and explained that we did not do 'Presidents' in the UK, preferring instead to stick with Chairmen. By the time I had bored her silly she had forgotten her question.

Persuading people to do things that they didn't want to was where I felt as a woman I had the greatest advantage. To smile sweetly, put on the charm and then to hammer home the question was normally all it needed to be effective.

There are times when you could say something that a man could never say to another male colleague. Such as the time when I had to face the head of a business and tell him that he valued a tonne of stock more than he valued an individual's life. He denied it of course, but then I was able to demonstrate the times when he had fired more than one operator when stock was ruined, but when a lad of seventeen had been killed through utter negligence, no-one had even been taken to task. Standing calmly, telling him this quietly face to face, in a way in which he could not deny it, helped make changes that day, and hopefully saved more lives.

On another occasion I was remonstrating with the CEO of a large business unit about the lack of supply chain management in the business and using a number of illustrations to demonstrate that this was causing loss of business and value, as well as causing incidents where the reputation of the business was being brought down. He actually said to me then, "I can see what you say and it makes me uncomfortable because I already knew it. But no one else had the nerve to bring me the proof. Thank you." I had worked hard on that occasion to maintain calm and to mirror his body language.

In minimising the disadvantages, it is good to avoid stressing the difference between you, avoid overtly feminine clothes, makeup and perfume whilst remaining sassy, smart and comfortable. Maximising the advantages means using all the tools that you can muster. It helps to use charm, keep calm, learn about body language and about assertiveness and to behave at all times with utter professionalism. It also helps to develop a really thick skin.

*The author welcomes your feedback and comments via
JK@riskrewardlimited.com*

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