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How To Deal When Someone At Work Crosses The Line

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Designed by Sydney Hass.

Earlier this month, a groan-inducing story came to light about super-inappropriate comments between colleagues — who also happened to be senators in the U.S. government. Back in 2008, after the birth of Senator Gillibrand’s second child, a male senator told her not to lose too much

behind the incident was Senator Inouye of Hawaii — a liberal Democrat who passed away in 2012.

The story itself is gross, but the implications are worse: If off-color commentary happens among public figures at the highest levels of government, there's a pretty good chance it's also happening at your office. Whether you're a top politician or a year into your first job, it can be near impossible to know how to respond if and when it happens to you.

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Gillibrand said she wasn't offended — saying that her older male colleagues didn't know any better because they grew up in a culture when that sort of thing was okay. We aren't that magnanimous; we think your colleagues do know better. If and when a colleague says something inappropriate, you have every right to set the record straight. Here are 10 all-too-common comments — and how to respond.



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1. The Food Critic

The comment: “You’re eating a salad. Good for you.”

Why it’s inappropriate: There’s a 99% chance that this is just small talk, not intended to be mean at all. But! There’s also a chance that it still made you feel self-conscious. “We call that unconscious discrimination,” says career coach and business therapist [Katherine Crowley](#). “[Your coworkers] are not aware of what they’re doing, and they think that they’re saying something friendly or kind.”

What to do: Just because it’s unconscious doesn’t mean it’s good. Especially if it’s happening regularly, this is the sort of thing that might really start to bug you — and worse, undercut your confidence. The best thing to do is say something nicely, like, “I know you may not have meant it, but it kind of bugs me when you talk about my diet at work.” If it’s really unconscious, that’ll stop them.

2. The Thief

The comment: “So, me and Liz had this great idea....”

want to miss the kudos for your brilliance. But, you also really don't want to look like a selfish jerk who says stuff like, "Actually, I thought of that alone."

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What to do: So, the best course of action here...kinda sucks. "Usually people who do this are chronic offenders, and everyone knows it, so you don't have to point it out, and you can take the high road and not make a scene," says career coach and leadership consultant Liz Bentley. Let it go and remember that cream rises. Next time around, make sure you don't share your great idea with anyone but your boss. The only exception here is if the idea is so Facebook-huge that you think getting credit for it would really change your career. In that case, take your boss aside and explain.

3. The Economist

The comment: "I'm surprised you could afford that."

Why it's inappropriate: There are maybe two instances when it's okay to talk about how much money you make at work: when you are negotiating with your boss to get your job, and when you're asking for that much-deserved raise. Otherwise: nope.

What to do: If someone asks, you can laugh it off ("Oh, God, talking about money never ends well") or be serious ("That's not an appropriate question") – but shut it down. No story about sharing salary info with a coworker ever ends well. And, remember, your salary isn't a straight-up valuation of your worth. People get paid what they get paid for lots of reasons: what they made at their last job, their experience level, how fiercely they negotiated when they started, etc.



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4. The Office Creep

The comment: “Can’t wait to work late with you tonight.”

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Why it’s inappropriate: Work shouldn’t be a place for any kind of sexual comments, period. And, while it’s great to be friends with the people you work with, this rule should be pretty hard and fast. You know the kinds of remarks we’re talking about — anything from, “I love it when you wear that dress” to “Looking forward to working late with you tonight.” Even though it might seem innocent, it makes you feel icky and like a line was crossed.

What to do: If you have the wherewithal in the moment, strong statements like, “That’s totally inappropriate, and I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that” should get the point across and nip it in the bud. “The key to these situations,” says Liz Bentley, “is measuring severity and offense.” If the issue is more endemic, this sort of thing is worth bringing to HR. If your company is too

5. The Health Expert

The comment: “You look exhausted.”

Why it’s inappropriate: This is code for “you look like crap.” Even the most well-meaning of people who say it are being unintentional jerks.

What to do: Especially if you are tired, you might be tempted to bite back with something like, “What is that supposed to mean?” But, in this case, your best bet is to put on a smile and just say, “I actually feel great!” That’ll diffuse the comment and let that person know that whatever you look like isn’t up for discussion.

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6. The Secret Racist (Or Unintentional Ignoramus)

The comment: “So...what kind of Asian are you?”

Why it’s inappropriate: Pretty much any other question about your race, ethnicity or background is just flat-out off limits.

What to do: If you really think your coworker is just a bonehead who’s being insensitive out of ignorance, Liz Bentley recommends answering the question, and then following it up by with a quick life lesson: “You can suggest that some people might be offended by that question, and let them know why.” But, it’s not your job to be an educator. If you think there’s even a hint of malice, take this one to HR.

7. The Leap Frog

The comment: “She used to be my intern.”

Why it’s inappropriate: This one’s about tone: Is this a factual statement, or a factual statement being used to subtly downplay your current status? If the latter, it’s bullying.

Crowley says: “There’s usually some people in the office who are verbally adept — see what they are doing.” Follow the example of someone you think deflects this sort of statement especially well, and then try it on for yourself. But, remember that it takes practice, and it might take some time to find the right words for you to set things right.



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8. Wannabe Joan Rivers

The comment: “Are you wearing that to the meeting?”

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Why it’s inappropriate: Talking about a coworker’s clothes (or hair or nails) follows the Thumper rule: “If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all.” But, not everyone gets that. Maybe your cubicle neighbor seems like she’s giving you a once-over every time you walk by, or maybe she makes off comments as you head out to big meetings.

forward, I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't comment on my outfit." If it comments happen more than twice, consider going to your supervisor.

9. The Surprise Gynecologist

The comment: "You just have pregnancy brain."

Why it's inappropriate: You miss a little deadline, not a huge deal, but then someone blames it on your pregnancy, which is. People are fascinated by pregnancy — and it is pretty damn miraculous — but that doesn't mean it's an acceptable ground for discriminatory comments.

What to do: Liz Bentley recommends you take it off the table for good with a firm but pleasant response like, "Oh, I think I just forgot, thanks" and then a quick follow-up, "But, I think we all forget things every once and a while, right? I don't think it has anything to do with my pregnancy."

10. The Jerk

The comment: "Maybe one day you'll be good at your job."

Why it's inappropriate: You have an office bully, and you don't know what you did to deserve it. Once in awhile, over the course of your career, you're bound to come across a colleague who's just mean.

What to do: "You have to make a decision about whether or not you can work with this person," says Crowley. If it's not causing you too much distress, just ignore it, since a confrontation is unlikely to get you anywhere. If it's really dragging you down, she says, "You can go through professional channels." If you go that route, try to bring records of your incidents with this person since it's likely your word against hers. But, the bottom line? Don't be afraid to stand up for yourself. You work hard, and no one has the right to bring you down.

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