

# BostonWorks

VIEW FROM THE CUBE | EILEEN BOYLAN

## A business decision: Be female or be funny

"And that," he said, "is why *you* have no future with this organization." We were walking into a "gender bias seminar," when my boss, no fan of female executives, delivered this dire prognostication. And I knew he meant it.

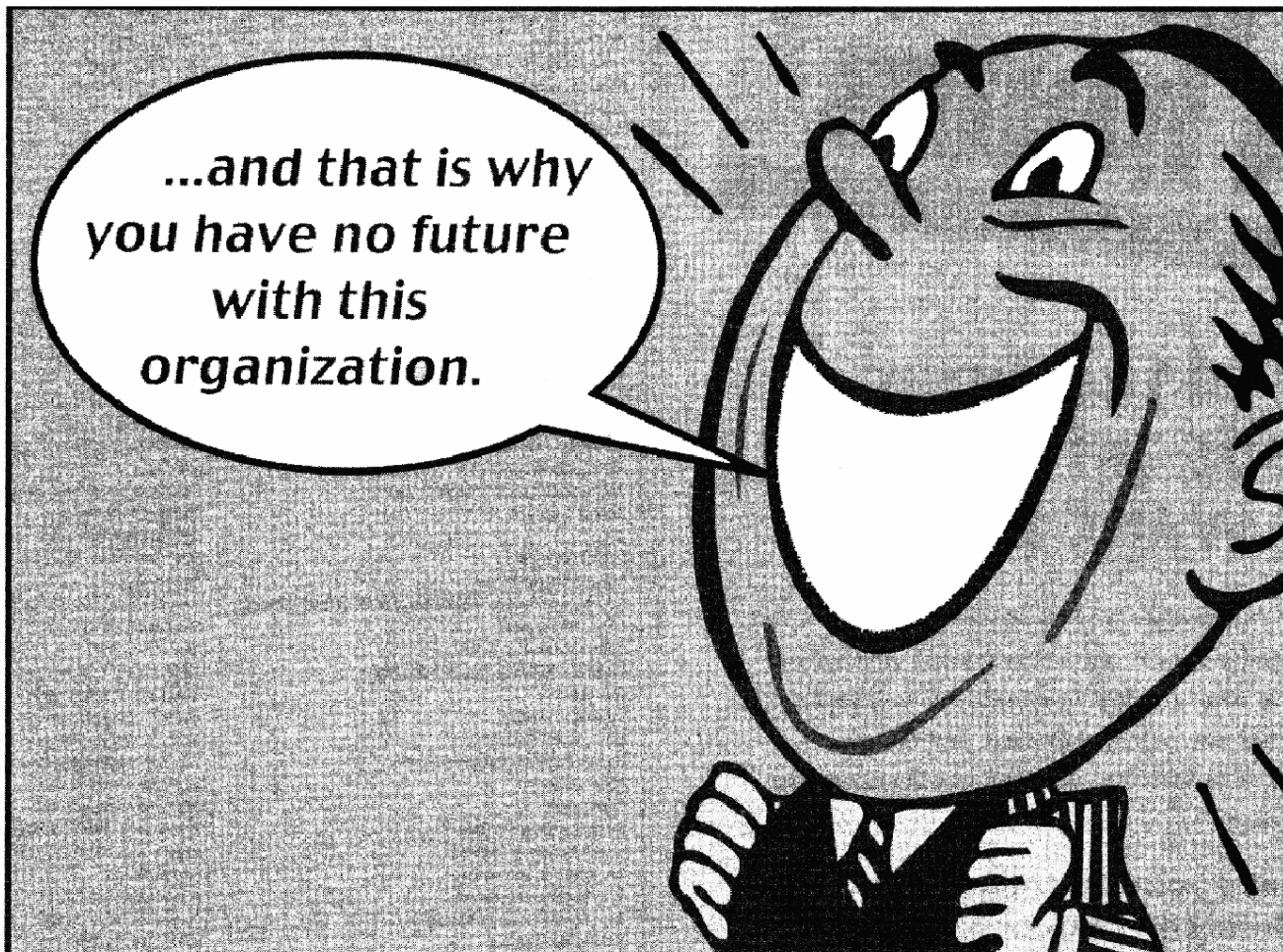
What provoked that day's outburst was an earlier meeting. My boss, Preston, had briefed a few internal-sales staffers about upcoming research in our building. The lab regularly tested female hygiene products downstairs but now, he quipped, "The company has decided to deal with men's, ah, (pause for effect) personal situations."

With the sensitivity of "The Office" megalomaniac, Michael Scott, he elaborated that these minimum-wage male visitors would be homeless, malodorous, alcoholic, cart-pushing losers who wear wool hats in the summer. "But, our crack security team, Officer Dick, (toothless man with plastic gun) has everything under control. Heh, heh, hey," he chuckled, like a George W. Bush impersonator on "Saturday Night Live."

So, when he inquired, amid the hilarity, if anyone had questions, I asked, "Are any of them single?"

And *that* was why I had no future in this organization. I didn't understand that women in business were not supposed to be funny. Especially funnier than Preston. The irony of being terminated at a gender bias seminar, *because* of gender bias, would have been rich, but I wasn't fired. Our employer, a consumer products company, would not allow it. HR promptly instructed Preston that tasteful humor, particularly in an informal meeting, was not grounds for termination. But, it was grounds for making my life even more miserable.

To be fair, at least Preston was honest. He hadn't wanted to hire



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me in the first place. He told his boss that he didn't think women, in general, belonged in management, and he especially didn't want me. At a private party weeks earlier, I had intoned Marilyn Monroe's breathy "Happy Birthday, Mr. President" for a terminally ill colleague who was celebrating his last. The guest of honor said it made his evening. My pro-

spective boss said it made me "stupid," and that he wouldn't hire me. He was overruled then. And, he was overruled when he tried to fire me at the seminar.

The company said we needed to make it work. So, Preston took the universal male route to conflict resolution and meaningful conversation — he invited me to play golf. When Mark Twain de-

scribed golf as "a good walk spoiled," he must have been teeing off behind us. Spoiled would actually be an understatement. I thought of the company might worry about our addressing our differences with metal clubs. Back at the office, people were speculating which of us would appear on the news with a Lacoste shirt over their head.

Somehow, we each escaped without bodily harm, but what was once a difficult relationship became a nonexistent one. There were no winners. He had been rendered powerless, and I just wanted out. We tiptoed around one another for a couple of months until I got another opportunity within the company. Not long after, he retired.

Maybe we conflicted because men don't find the same things funny. The company used to sponsor a beauty pageant that had been repackaged as a "scholarship contest," which the men in the office defended, with straight faces, as legitimate. But the women around the office took to referring to it as the "swimsuit SATs" or "the only exam where a 'D' trumps an 'A.'"

My friend Kelly and I once did a spoof of the pageant's "talent" competition — a takeoff of a particularly memorable "ventriloquist" act for our annual off-site marketing skit. The women laughed loudly, the men clapped uncomfortably, and we envisioned our futures in the mail room. Yet men performed equally irreverent skits, including one suggesting the VP of marketing had escaped a psych ward, and somehow it was OK.

My female colleagues and I often lamented the differing perspectives regarding male and female humor. Katie Couric was a popular topic. People said she was a "lightweight" because she giggled on-air. Ronald Reagan costarred with a chimpanzee in "Bedtime for Bonzo," yet we elected him president. JFK appeared in drag at the Hasty Pudding Club. People thought he was pretty smart, too. It was the same in our organization. Men who displayed a lighter side were still taken seriously, while women were not.

Preston had a well-earned reputation as the funniest person at cocktail hour. And he was very funny. But, he had no sense of humor regarding women. I probably shouldn't have ordered the most expensive cigar at his going away party, especially since he was paying. But as I proudly displayed my Cohiba Esplendido, this joke was literally on him.