



How to Stop Bullies in their Tracks: *Stop Acting like a Girl (I can say that)*

There is a kind of body snatcher thing that goes on when smart people enter board rooms, as if their brain is sucked out of their head and they just nod and smile at everything the head of the organization says. But there I was, serving on yet another board. And the head of the organization was proposing a very expensive project that required the organization to go into debt. Serious debt. I looked around, waiting for the bank president, the CEO of a company, the head of a school, or anyone on the board besides me to say *something*. But everyone just nodded and smiled.

I wanted to be a team player. I didn't want to be the one person who spoke up. But I did. I said I disagreed with the project, said we couldn't afford it and as a board we had to protect the financial well-being of the organization.

And that's when the bullying happened.

The head of the organization started to turn red. More purple really. (I saw the veins on his neck!) He pointed his finger at me and started yelling. 'You don't understand the financials. You're short sighted. You're harming the long-term goals of this organization.'

I wish I could tell you I stood up and said, "This is bullshit and you know it." As much as I want to think of myself as a badass (who can think about something to say *before* I'm in the car driving home), I felt humiliated. I froze. I sat silent and when the vote came, I was the lone vote in opposition.

The next day, I decided to write him an email that *practically* went like this:

"I just want to tell you that I felt so embarrassed and humiliated last night at the board meeting. Actually, I know this is a project you care about, and I am so sorry that you believe my position is one that hurts the organization. I hope you know I love this organization. I think it was an unfortunate situation. Next time can we treat each other more respectfully?"

I know, pretty bad, huh? Thankfully, before I hit send, I decided to call one of my male friends. You know the type—you work twice as hard as he does, but his results are just as good. I told him what happened, and he dictated to me the email I needed to send instead:

“Your behavior last night was unacceptable. If you want a rubber stamp board member, you have the wrong person. I have plenty of volunteer opportunities and will resign my position if you believe a board member should simply agree with you.”

I said to my friend, “Seriously? I should send that? It’s not my style.” He said, “Jesus, Wendy, grow some.”

So, I sent it. And guess what? The bully fell all over himself in apologizing and he *never* acted like an asshole to me again. Here are the six things I learned that day about confronting bullies:

1. Don’t talk about your feelings. If bullies understood feelings, they wouldn’t be bullies.
2. Be strong in your language. Do not use any qualifiers that undermine your power like using “just” or “actually”, saying “Does that make sense?” or “I’m no expert, but...”. Don’t apologize before asking a question. Don’t use “I think” and don’t turn a statement into a question by your intonation. If you’re interested in learning more about how we undermine ourselves with words, read Tara Mohr’s book, Playing Big.
3. If you are meeting in person, make sure your body language and eye contact are strong. A bully can sense vulnerability. Practice in the mirror if you need to.
4. Don’t explain. One of my friends, who is the head of a governmental agency, called me last week. She told me that one of the men in her organization was rude to her in a meeting and started questioning her work on a project. She said she was working getting the data together to show he was wrong. This is what I told her, “Go home. Do not respond to his criticism. Go into his office in the morning and tell him to cut that shit out.”
5. Don’t take anything personally. People are bullies for a lot of reasons and almost none of it has to do with you. I told my friend that after she told her colleague to stop his behavior, it would be really great if she could then ask him if he wanted to go to lunch.
6. Martin Luther King said, “There comes a time when silence is betrayal.” You are standing up to bullies not just for yourself, but for all the other people they have bullied in the past and for those they might not bully, because you had the courage to realize that silence is betrayal.

Unlearning things we’ve been taught since we were little girls is no easy task. But I apply this approach to every bully and asshole I meet in my work, and it works every time. I promise it gets easier and easier. Try it and let me know how it goes.