

Look (at Yourself) Before You Leap

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Dear Susan:

We are in the process of merging two departments at work. The manager taking over the new department told a fellow employee that the first thing he was going to do was get rid of two “attractive” women because everybody will be staring at them all day. I am responsible for the two women until the merger. What should I do?

I’ve got a Secret

Dear Secret:

Don’t panic. I find it hard to believe that this is more than a lame joke. In making the rounds it dropped the context: the nudge, nudge and wide-eyed pause that sets off a forced laugh track when a superior cracks a line, any line. It lost the “as if.” As in, as if anyone can get any real work done with these beautiful babes around.

Of course it’s in bad taste. Like the punch line of the feminist light bulb joke, it’s not funny, either. But before you tip off the two employees in question, treat this as a rumour to be ratified by its source. Approach this manager confidentially. Ask if he’s aware of the gossip, that he’s about to sack these two women because they’re too good-looking. And let him know, just one colleague chatting with another, that if it’s true, the sacked women could file law suits, having been fired without just cause. They’d likely be entitled to a tidy sum and there could be a public relations mess, too. If his name were associated with all this it would be mud.

Instead of getting on your high horse and wagging your finger in his face, I’d clue him in to the picture discreetly, just one manager talking to another. And while you’re at it, if you have a good word to say about the performance of these two employees, seize the day. A plug might give them a leg up, as if they need one. Economics research tells us that physical beauty boosts earnings and promotions, especially in the private sector. According to Daniel Hamermesh, the economist who conducted the research at the University of Texas at Austin “we found no evidence that being too attractive hurt, quite the contrary.” He added that your manager may say, somewhat flippantly that the good looking women cause distractions, but as his research has shown “surely they bring in more clients.”

The advantage of good looks is a “robust” effect that increases over time. So outside Hollywood, anyway, the gorgeous patina of acquired wisdom is more highly rewarded than youthful glow. Even if it’s lacking in your workplace, at least there’s justice somewhere.

Dear Susan:

I am a senior manager trying to redefine my career in the face of a major setback. I am in a volatile industry – IT -- and have been downsized twice. Now I am in a company about to be cannibalized by a larger one. I see the writing on the wall and would like to see my way out before they force me out. Even if I'm offered a severance package, I'd like to feel as if I have choices. Any advice?

Waiting for the Axe

Dear Waiting:

This is a double-barrelled question. The first part is existential: who are you and what do you want from your work? The second part is all about problem solving. Who would want what you're offering? Once you answer the first question, the second one is just homework. It's not rocket science to use the web to research companies and managers with problems only someone with your expertise can solve, or to do preliminary research on a business that always intrigued you. Once you answer the first question, the second one falls into place.

Of course answering the first question is the hard part. A friend in the midst of a career transition called the experience "dancing on the head of a pin," a colleague called it the ultimate balancing act, and two writers in January's Harvard Business Review, Herminia Ibarra and Kent Lineback, call the unsettled period between leaving one career and finding the next one the stage of "trials and tribulations," in one's personal narrative. They compare it to Homer's Odyssey, when the main character of the story wanders aimlessly in the wilderness. Sure, the uncertainty causes tension. But the catalyst that helps resolve that conflict will propel you forward, providing fuel to how compellingly you tell your story and where you choose to take it next.

In your case the catalyst can be the merger that forces you to evaluate what you enjoy and where you excel in your field. Is it solving technical challenges? Marshalling the troops while guarding your independence? Strategizing? Resolving people problems? Project management? Despite your impression, information technology is far from dead, according to David Perry, an IT headhunter with Perry Martel International, who says "The world has changed over the last few years. There are more possibilities now than people have the opportunity to chase after." For now, deciding what you're chasing after should be your goal. Only then will your story have coherence and you will feel you have choices.

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