

Nina DiSesa explains the rules of sex and power in the workplace—and what *hasn't* changed.



Men don't like women who are more driven than they are, but they like Nina DiSesa—according to Nina DiSesa. Having sacrificed “everything other than children,” DiSesa has risen through the ranks of advertising to become chairman and chief creative officer of ad giant McCann Erickson New York. When she reached the top, however, she found herself without much female company. And when she looked down, she continued to see many women dropping out of corporate America, especially companies with male-dominated cultures. To keep women in the game, she wrote *Seducing the Boys Club: Uncensored Tactics From a Woman at the Top* (Ballantine). DiSesa, who’s “over 55” and insists that her publicity photo is both recent and unretouched, spoke from her New York office about her predilection for S&M, how to have a meltdown at work, and whether the corporate playing field will ever be equal for men and women. —VADIM LIBERMAN

So Nina DiSesa is into S&M. Kinky!

Ha! When I talk about S&M, I’m talking about seduction and manipulation. The most successful people in business, warfare, politics, and life itself are masters of the art of manipulation. But it’s the combination of the two that is important, because people who are manipulators are seen as selfish and in the wrong. *Manipulate* is a dirty word, but if you combine it with seduction—that is, charm and benevolence—so that the other person is going to benefit as much as you are, then it will work to your advantage. Most people actually enjoy being handled as long as you don’t hurt them or operate maliciously. They won’t resent you for manipulating them if you give them something in return, like helping them to be better at their jobs or better people.

For example, during the first half of my career, I was a hotheaded creative person who would yell at everybody if things weren’t going my way. That was the wrong way to manipulate people. I eventually won whatever I was trying to win, but it was at a tremendous cost. When I came to work at J. Walter Thompson in Chicago to be a creative director, the scuttlebutt on me was that I was a hothead. I had to work hard to overcome that reputation. I wanted peo-

ple to know that I’d gone through that transition, where as a creative person you’re so frightened that someone is going to make you look foolish that you just go berserk. Now that I was a leader, I had to be different. I still had to use my powers of persuasion, but I had to do it in a charming, non-confrontational way.

Do most women in business know how to manipulate men to their advantage?

No, they don’t know how to manipulate men so that men will allow them to get to the top. I am constantly amazed at how many intelligent women either don’t understand that this is important or refuse to manipulate a situation.

A 20-year-old woman said to me, “I don’t feel like I have to manipulate people. I’ve worked hard and gone to college and I feel like I don’t have to resort to these tactics to get ahead.” In truth, she’s right. We’re all treated like shit when we’re in our 20s. Men and women are equal then. But women notice later, like in their 30s, that things aren’t exactly equal anymore. And that’s when they’ll wish they had developed their own tactics earlier in their careers. Testosterone is too powerful for women to handle with reason and intellect alone.

Does this cause women to resent their

male colleagues?

They don’t walk into the workplace already resenting men, but they become resentful if they have a reason to feel they aren’t being treated fairly. When women are passed over for a man whom they feel isn’t as good as they are, then they will resent both the man who got the promotion and the man—because it usually is a man—who *gave* that promotion.

But as you note, women are told not to let resentment—or any other emotion—show at work.

Don’t get angry; don’t cry; don’t criticize a man in front of other people. These are all rules given to women to follow, but they are just clamping us down, making us into Stepford wives. Women have to show men when they’re angry—otherwise, they think they can do whatever they want to women. But it’s important to do this in a way that’s intelligent. Without being a baby about it, you *can* show anger—and people will respect you for it.

Is it ever OK for a woman to cry at work?

A couple of months ago, I was on the phone with our [male] COO, and I was saying that a client was forcing me to do something creatively that was going to make me feel humiliated. As I was talk-

ing to him, I started to cry. He was so upset that he immediately came into the office to help me resolve the problem. He's not used to me becoming emotional and saw it was a serious situation. But you have to play the crying card discriminately. You can't go around blubbering all the time, or no one will pay attention to you. If you play that card only when it's really important, the people who see you in that state will always rally behind you, because they don't want to see a person who's normally in control lose control.

In general, though, if you're going to have a meltdown, do it in private or in the ladies' room. It's really difficult to have one in front of a male, especially if he's your boss. Men are scared when women do that. I've asked men, "Why are you so scared when we have a meltdown?" They say, "Because we don't know what you're going to do." But men will not be afraid or dismissive of women who express their anger in an intelligent, *controlled* fashion. What scares them is hysterics.

What about a man having a meltdown?

Oh, men don't call their meltdowns *meltdowns*. They just get "angry." When a man shows his anger, he is applauded for being strong and uncompromising. A meltdown is when you don't have control over the situation, and men will rarely admit to losing control.

And I assume men are never allowed to cry.

When a man cries at work, he's considered a wimp. In most cases, double standards work against females, but this is a case when it works in our favor. I've had men come into my office and tear up. If it's about their children or marriage breaking up, I have a different attitude than if it's because someone has done something at work that bothers them.

Are women more supportive of their female colleagues?

They are actually *less* supportive. Something happens to women in charge.

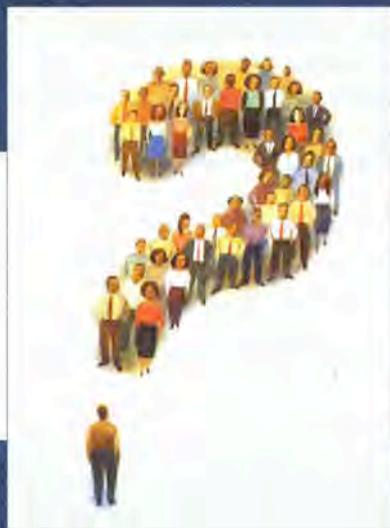
Very often, they become cruel. Maybe they feel they've made it to the top and it's that *All About Eve* syndrome: that there's only one place for a woman at the top, and if they allow another woman to ascend, they'll be in jeopardy. Also, when I became a leader, everybody was so attentive to me. I'd recognize that it was the title more than me personally, but when women at the top suddenly get all this attention from men they've had to fight to get attention from for many years, it becomes like a tonic.

You also claim that women mistakenly downplay their achievements.

I was caught doing that just last week. I always wonder why women don't brag. Do you even *know* a successful man in business who doesn't brag about himself or take credit for his achievements? Even the unsuccessful ones do it. And, as if a brag-challenged brain isn't bad enough, when someone heaps praise on us, what do we do? We immediately refuse any

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responsibility for our success. We deflect glory. Women will say: "I had a great team on my side." No kidding. Who doesn't have a great team?

What's wrong with acknowledging teammates and their contributions?

Nothing, but at some point, if you're working your way up the ladder, your boss needs to know that you were a big part of the success. If you deflect it to your team, your boss will ask why he needs you when it's your team that's doing the work. I think it goes back to how men tend to be braver in the first place. They tend to be fearless. When men make mistakes, they think, "Oh, it's not the end of the world. I'll just fix it." Women tend to think, "Oh my God, oh my God, what am I going to do? I made a mistake." Men also feel like they'll be respected even if they make a big mistake because at least they thought big, whereas women feel that others might think they didn't do their homework.

Let's turn to your looks. Do you consider yourself attractive?

Oh yeah, I am attractive. I was always an attractive person.

Do you think your appearance—

—helped me get ahead? I don't know. Women don't have to be beautiful to be able to do what is necessary to get ahead, but they need to have something to make men want to be around them. It doesn't necessarily have to be physical—it could be one's personality. I see women in this agency who are not attractive but who are so dynamic and so valuable that the men cherish them, so you don't have to be attractive to win their trust and support. Of course, if you're *too* attractive, it works against you—men will look at you like a sex object and won't listen to what you're saying. I've seen attractive women who are ambitious who played down their sexuality. I know one woman who comes to work with no makeup and looks very dowdy, but when we go out, she puts

makeup on and looks like a totally different person.

Men are looking for people—men *and* women—who are going to make them more successful. They aren't looking at appearance. Who can they count on? Men are too selfish to think otherwise. They are looking for someone who's going to make them look good. If you are a rainmaker and bring in the money, men will love you. The ability to make money in a boys' club is the fastest way to become a member, and if you make enough money, they will even follow your lead. That's more important than looks.

So is it appropriate for a woman to play up her sex appeal at work?

I've seen attractive men wrap women around their fingers, so if you're an attractive woman and you can use your sexual appeal in a charming way that doesn't get you into trouble, then use it. You just have to be careful not to send out a signal that you're using your sexuality in a way that promises sexual favors. Innocent flirting, though, is OK. Whereas unwanted comments from men to women are a form of sexual harassment, it's very hard to find an unwelcome comment directed at a man. Men love it. They don't feel threatened by it—as long as women don't do it in a predatory way. Like if you "accidentally" touch a man's arm while you are talking about something serious, you can interrupt yourself with a quick show of admiration: "Wow, your arm is like steel. Been working out?" I know, I know, it's obvious and underhanded, but it always works. At the same time, it's *never* OK for a man to do this to a woman, unless he has a really, really close relationship with her.

That's another double standard!

It absolutely is. This is just another one that works in our favor.

If a man were to tell you, "Wow, Nina, that blouse looks great on you—"

I would love it. At my point in life, when someone pays you a compliment, you love it. When I was younger, it

would have made me feel uncomfortable. It all depends on where you are on the food chain and where the other person is. If he's too high up and you're too far down, it's inappropriate.

You know, it used to be that women in advertising were there to take care of the men and have sex with them. That's what secretaries did. Not all of them, but it was very prevalent. Even when I came to New York in the '80s to Y&R, there were a lot of men in high positions having relationships with women on a lower level. I was very frightened about that when I was there, and I was careful about how I presented myself. I didn't want anyone hitting on me. I was a serious creative person. Now, I don't mind anyone hitting on me.

With more women having risen to high levels, are they having relationships with men lower down?

I don't see that much. I'm not sure I would know anyway. When you get to my level, no one tells you anything like that anymore. I don't think women who are high up are looking for boy toys. They want partners at or above their level.

Is it safe for men to read your book?

I've been trying to get men in touch with their female side for fourteen years. I always thought it was good for men to read women's magazines and vice versa. Men should understand where women are coming from and what our frustrations are. I'd like men to read the book—but they won't. Men don't read books by women.

Do you think there will eventually be a level playing field for men and women?

No, and I think most women feel that there won't be. In some businesses it will be, but not in those that are typical boys' clubs, like advertising and finance. Things are changing, but not fast enough. Take government: It will be interesting to see if Hillary carries more than three states. I remember when I was in college, I thought things by now would be different. But they aren't. ☹