

A battle cry for the rank and file
`Dignitarian' cause gives voice to principle that every worker deserves respect

By Penelope Trunk | August 6, 2006 (Boston Globe)

Here's a new word for the workplace: rankism. File it in your brain next to racism and sexism, and brace yourself for a big change at the office, because rankism is another kind of discrimination we should not tolerate.

What's rankism, or rankist behavior? It is hiring an intern and ignoring her all summer. Or pointlessly yelling at the receptionist about a manager who is late. Or a professor's taking credit for a graduate student's research. All these are examples of people who think they can treat someone disrespectfully because of their lower rank. ``The Devil Wears Prada" has tons of juicy examples as well as snappy fashion and a happy ending to make the story acceptable.

But rankism is never acceptable. And Robert Fuller, the man who devised the word, is on a mission to end the behavior. His big idea is that people have a right to be treated with dignity no matter where they are in the pecking order. He's part of what's become known as the ``dignitarian movement."

Wondering if you're at a job where you're treated with dignity? You need to receive recognition, humane treatment, and a living wage.

If your job doesn't qualify, you need to speak up, which is hard to do, but having a word to identify the problem is half the battle. ``Vocabulary changes things," says Fuller. ``The Feminine Mystique" referred to the `problem without a name.' Sexism was not a word until five years after that book came out. Once the word sexism was available, women had a weapon to make demands."

Fuller wants you to take cues from the success of that movement. Say, ``Hey, that's rankist," the same way you'd say, ``That's sexist."

But don't yell: ``Having the words rankist and rankism will give workers in every line of action a battle cry. They won't scream at the

top of their lungs. They will mention it calmly and cause the person on top to look at their actions."

Here are five more steps you can take to combat rankism in your work life:

Get a good read on potential managers. Management sets the tone of respect or disrespect at work. So sniff out offenders before you take a job. Vanessa Carney works at Let's Dish, a food-preparation company. ``The management team here is genuine," says Carney. ``The people who run this company have a good attitude and it trickles down." Carney was especially impressed when the owner sat down with her after a few months to find out what, exactly, she wanted to do in her career.

Let people know that rankism matters. Probably those behaving this way are not even conscious that they're doing it. In one study about harassment, most people who were disrespectful were not aware of it -- they thought they were making jokes at the time.

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``They are misguided comedians," says study author Catherine Hill, director of research at the American Association of University Women. She also found that people respond to what they perceive as cultural norms. So speak up when you see it, even if you are not on either side of the exchange.

Don't accept rationales for rankism. Common refrains: ``This is the only way the business can work," (to justify long and unpredictable hours); ``I got through this so you can too," (to justify hazinglike practices).

Joanna Vaillant is a management consultant -- a position known for difficult work conditions. But she did research to find a consulting company that respects its employees, and chose Boston Consulting Group. She recommends talking to people who work in the company about the company. ``In business school I talked to classmates who worked at different companies," says Vaillant. And she chose well. She recently got married and received assignments that would allow her time and headspace to prepare for that big day.

Take a bad job. Working at a low-level job is not just a headache, it's an integral part of your personal development. A big barrier to fighting racism and sexism is that if you are white you don't know what it's like to be black, and if you are male you don't know what it's like to be female. But anyone can work in a low-level job -- especially in the service industry, where the exposure to rankist behavior from customers is huge.

Consider leaving. One of the scariest things about demanding change at the workplace is the prospect of getting fired. But young people today -- who invariably fill entry-level positions -- switch jobs often. So the risk of offending a boss for speaking out against rankism does not seem that big a deal.

The workplace is ripe for eradicating rankism. The youngest workers are optimistic that they can change the world and passionate about diversity. Also, in poll after poll, young people report less interest in money and more interest in the quality of the work experience and the quality of life that work affords. So it makes sense that now is the time for the dignitarian movement, and we should all jump on board.

Penelope Trunk writes the Brazen Careerist blog at blog.penelopetrunk.com