

# stand up for yourself!

What to  
say to get  
your way—  
even in  
the most  
difficult  
situations  
by **deborah  
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**m**any women cringe at any suggestion of conflict, trying to avoid it at all costs. Ironically, shrinking from small confrontations can sometimes lead to major disruptions down the line.

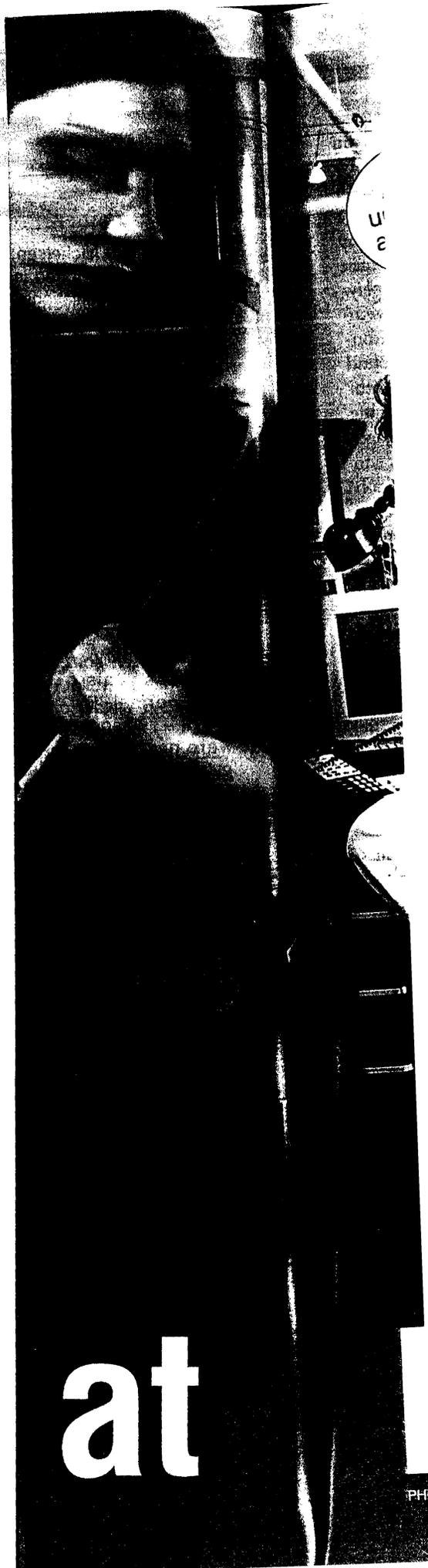
This happened to a woman I'll call Marla, who lost a capable assistant because she was afraid to risk confrontation. Marla tended to send out hints when there was something she didn't like, whereas Karen, the assistant, was a no-nonsense, supercompetent type who charged ahead with what she thought was right; hints didn't even register on her radar screen.

Marla had started a consulting business in her home. Karen was her first assistant, and the first task Marla assigned her was to order her own desk. Until Karen's desk was delivered, Marla invited Karen to sit at *her* desk, because Marla was often out of the office.

When the new furniture arrived, Marla discovered that, instead of a desk, Karen had ordered a computer workstation that she used only when she needed to be on the computer. At other times, she continued to use Marla's desk. Marla was taken aback, but she said nothing. She adapted to this unexpected situation—and her resentment mounted.

Often, when Marla returned to the office and found Karen seated at her desk, she had to wait while her assistant gathered her things and vacated the space. There were

# at work, at



And clean up your mess again, Frank!

Sure, I can stay late—

But I should have had this a week ago.

Nice work, Tiffany!

# t home, in life

PHOTOGRAPHED BY [unreadable]

times when Marla stopped at the office briefly, and Karen would remain seated, knowing that Marla was not there to stay. It got so that Marla's blood pressure would rise as she neared her own office.

In the end, Karen quit—after it became increasingly clear that Marla was not happy with her. Marla's sense of relief was enormous, though it later waned: She never found another assistant with Karen's skills.

### how differently it might have gone

In retrospect, Marla wished she had said outright when the workstation arrived, "I think there's been a misunderstanding. I wanted you to order a desk of your own, so I can have mine to myself." But even today, the thought of these words can make Marla wince. Everything she learned throughout her life told her not to say things to others that might make them feel bad. She has an inner censor that stops her tongue—or twists it—so she communicates potentially hurtful information in ways that many others miss entirely.

In fact, it was Marla herself who had said to Karen, early on, when she was on her way somewhere, "That's OK; don't get up. I'm not staying long." And Karen had apparently taken that to mean she *never* had to get up if Marla was stopping into the office for a brief time.

It would be easy to conclude that Marla has trouble asserting herself. But she did not run into the same problem with subsequent assistants. So the difficulty was not only Marla's inability to confront but the ineffectiveness of her style of communicating with Karen, who was not attuned to subtle indications of discontent.

Consider the contrast with Karen's successor, April.

When April began work, Marla said, "I'm often out of the office; if you would rather sit at my desk when I'm not here, feel free." But April never did. She stayed at the

if they don't, your job becomes harder: You have to let them know you are dissatisfied with their behavior; you have to confront them.

Men are often more comfortable than women with open confrontation. As boys, they learn to use language to challenge one another and deflect challenges as a way of negotiating status in a group. In fact, boys often use confrontation for fun, by mock-arguing, teasing, or play-fighting. In this spirit, many men assume they have to demand respect or others will see weakness. The ironic result of this difference is that women more often find themselves in a position where they *need* to confront others to demand respect—precisely because not throwing their weight around leaves them more open to challenges to their authority.

### just say no

Another conversational ritual common among women is to avoid saying no outright by stating the reasons why they want to say no—with the expectation that the other person will then retract the request.

I saw this in action once while visiting a colleague in her office. The telephone rang, she answered it, and I heard her side of a conversation: "It's a terribly busy time, Jim," she said. "I don't see how I can add another committee." And then she added, "If you really can't find anyone else, I'll do it, but I hope it won't come to that."

After hanging up, she turned to me and said, "I can't believe it. I told him I couldn't do it, but he put me on the committee anyway!"

"You didn't tell him you couldn't do it," I said. "You told him you didn't want to do it, and expected him to let you off the hook. But you left the door open, and he pushed you through. He took you at your word."

From her point of view, my colleague *did* say no—and



Women often **avoid** saying no outright—but when their **message** doesn't get through, they realize that **confrontation** is needed.

computer workstation, even though it meant the larger desk was unused much of the time. Marla gradually realized how much more comfortable this made her. With Karen, if Marla gave her an inch, she took a mile. If Marla gave April an inch, April declined to take it. This fit perfectly with Marla's style, because she felt better knowing she had offered the inch.

### nice girls can finish misunderstood

Like many women, Marla was operating on a system she learned as a girl: Act as if everyone is an equal, and assume others will give you the respect you deserve. But

there was nothing wrong with the way she said it. What was wrong was saying no in that way to *Jim*. Were she to change her style and get in the habit of refusing directly, she might get her message across better to people like Jim—but she would risk offending other colleagues who would perfectly understand her meaning the way she phrased it.

Again, it's only when a message doesn't get through that we realize confrontation is needed. If it is hard to say no right off the bat, it is even harder to dispel a misunderstanding after the fact—for example, to say "Oh, I'm afraid you didn't get my meaning. I was

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really saying no." Ideally, you learn over time who will correctly perceive your indirect refusal and who will need to hear a more explicit response.

### communication styles

Sometimes, different personalities and ways of communicating can make it seem as if we come from countries with different traffic signal systems—interpreting the lights however we might see fit.

Some of us charge forward, assuming the light is green until we encounter a roadblock. Others assume the light is red unless someone tells us it's green: We don't act until we get the go-ahead. Still others see yellow at every intersection, proceeding with caution, attuned to signs that others have objections.

Each of these systems has advantages in some instances. A yellow-light person is more likely to pick up problems before they burgeon out of control, whereas a green-light person might be sailing along with a project, even as disgruntlement is building into a full-scale revolt. But in other instances, a red-light or even a yellow-light person is imagining objections where none exist, while the green-lighter is accomplishing goals and making headway.

Confrontation plays a different role in each of these scenarios. If you're a red-light or yellow-light type, you will be horrified at the green-lighters charging ahead. You need to force yourself to stand in their way and hold up a stop sign when you feel they're going in the wrong direction—or are trampling you in their path. But if you're dealing with a yellow-lighter, you just have to hold up your sign in their peripheral vision, and they will pick up the cue. If you're dealing with a red-lighter, you might need to encourage them to go ahead. But be gentle with objections, because even a casual question might be taken as a major challenge and a reason to back off.

### don't back down

Avoiding confrontation *can* be an effective way to get along. There are many cultures where everyone, men as well as women, learn to minimize conflict and empha-

size harmony in the face of disagreement. The system usually works well because it is shared. But there are times when avoiding confrontation just allows conflict to fester, and those who are willing to make trouble gain disproportionate power.

On the job, nothing is more insidious than a misbehaving employee no one is willing to confront. An immediate colleague can try to draw the line. But sometimes



only a supervisor has the authority, and if she or he doesn't use it, everyone gets demoralized.

This occurred in a hospital where a nurse continually showed up late, gave wrong information to patients, and failed to make needed entries on charts. In desperation, the other nurses, who were scrambling to figure out and correct the problems that were created, went to the supervisor and complained.

"I'm not getting between you," the supervisor said. "You have to work it out for yourselves."

That might have made sense if the conflict arose between siblings and friends, but at work, it's the supervisor's job to mediate. What happened in this case—as so often happens in such situations—is that the competent nurses quit, leaving the incompetent one in place.

Those who are willing to *(continued on page 196)*



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## stand up for yourself

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make a scene often gain the upper hand. This is especially true with people who terrify those around them with angry outbursts. Knowing that someone might blow her stack—or even just make a snappish remark—leads the rest of us to tiptoe around her. But often these quick-to-anger types are also quick to back off when their anger meets with resistance. If we offer no resistance, how are they to know that their outbursts are unacceptable? Our passive reaction has shown the opposite.

A family member who is quick to anger can terrorize an entire household. In my mother's family that role was taken by her brother Norman. His favorite victim was his older brother, Albert, a sensitive musician who was an easy target. Norman threw shoes on Albert's beloved piano, turned on the radio as soon as Albert sat down to play, and became angry when their mother served others food before serving him. But when anyone in the family got fed up and stopped speaking to him, he cried—literally—and begged to be forgiven.

Along with quickness to anger, quickness to be hurt can also become a kind of power. The fear of hurting someone can become a muzzle that prevents others from expressing concerns that need to be aired.

A man once told me that his wife wanted so badly to be perfect that she was devastated when he expressed any dissatisfaction or criticism. So he learned over time to hold his tongue in order to spare her feelings. The problem then became that he had no way of letting her know of his complaints, and he felt stuck with situations that would have been fairly easy to alter if only they had been able to discuss them.

This is more or less why Marla lost Karen, her first and, as it turned out, most skilled assistant. She often wonders whether she could have kept Karen if only she had confronted her—cordially, but firmly—whenever she felt Karen was stepping over a line.

Harmony is never achieved by avoiding confrontation entirely. It can be achieved only by using confrontation constructively when it is needed. ★

## computer confrontation?

**i**nitially, it might seem that e-mail is a perfect solution to the confrontation-avoidance dilemma. If you find it daunting to look someone in the eye and say something you know she won't like, why not take advantage of the blank computer screen, where, sitting alone, you can muster the courage to express yourself? Sometimes this can work, but it's risky.

Jill discovered just how dangerous it is, when, upset with her brother because she felt he was not doing his share of caring for their aging parents, she e-mailed him, expressing her frustration. As she laid out her complaint, she listed all the ways she felt he had not done his part.

Incensed, her brother forwarded the message to their other siblings, one of whom inadvertently forwarded it to their parents. Jill was mortified to receive a message from her father saying he and her mother did not need help: They had managed on their own for 60 years and were not yet ready to become dependent on their children.

E-mail, memos, and voice mail are never good options in delicate situations. You need the nuance of face-to-face communication. True, with one-way messages you can get out all your ideas before being interrupted, and the recipients of disturbing news can collect themselves in private, but there are liabilities too. You can't tell how your words are being taken, so you cannot head off misinterpretations or offer reassurances, and you can dig your own grave and jump into it before you realize you didn't come across as you intended. Moreover, as Jill discovered, messages are too easily forwarded—either intentionally or by mistake.

