



Why can't men and women work together? - by Jane Smith

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As an American business leader and architect—who also happens to be a woman—should I avoid one-on-one meetings with men? According to a Morning Consult poll conducted for The New York Times, a distrust of opposite-gender workplace interactions would not make me anomalous.

Released in early July, the poll found that around a quarter of U.S. men and women think private work meetings with colleagues of the opposite sex are inappropriate and nearly two-thirds say people should take extra caution around members of the opposite sex at work. The survey's release follows the resurfacing of vice president Mike Pence's comments that he shuns private meals with women other than his wife.

While Pence's statement was disturbing, the survey results illustrate pervasive barriers in the modern workforce. The ability to move freely and without obstacles to opportunity is essential to success. It's a linchpin of our economic competitiveness. No less, it's a guarantee of the freedoms we all hold, men and women, as Americans.

The idea of these barriers seems odd to me, too, particularly given my career. It would have been impossible to build and run my firm, and win and complete significant architecture projects, without one-on-one meetings with male partners, staff, clients, colleagues, and mentors.

The same can be said for the millions of women who now make up 40% of U.S. entrepreneurs and hold nearly half of all sales positions. As women continue to rise in rank across job sectors, men who wish to work with or learn from them might find themselves unable to meet with their bosses or mentors as a result. Clearly no one can afford this barrier, male or female.

Despite the negative effects for all workers, a widespread hesitation to participate in one-on-one meetings with members of the opposite sex inevitably hurts women and gender minorities the most. Men still hold the lion's share of institutional power in the U.S. workforce. Branding opposite-sex interactions as inappropriate allows this power to be preserved and passed down to other men.

It is impossible to discuss the Morning Consult survey results without considering the rationale, whether subconscious or not, that informed participants. Sexual harassment and assault in American workplaces is real—and directed primarily toward women—so it's reasonable to assume a woman avoiding solo meetings with men may have genuine concern for safety. The presumed male perspective, however, is even more disturbing. It seems to rely on outdated notions of women as a monolithic sexualized entity, out to seduce men and distract them from their work.

The fact remains, however. To do business, we men and women do need to meet. And the overall climate for doing so is getting better, not worse.

Restricted abilities to meet with men would have spelled doom for my architecture practice, Spacesmith, that I started in 1987, with two married men. Looking back, countless moments of professional success can be attributed to collaboration with individuals unlike myself, including men. I cannot help but wonder, however, if opportunities in my professional life might have fallen through simply because a man was apprehensive to meet with me because of my gender.

Probably. But I'm not looking back.

Though my business is in New York, I grew up in Wyoming with a politically conservative father who nevertheless encouraged me to enter the business world and compete—or collaborate—with likeminded men. Allowing this kind of attitude to dominate the workplace will lead to environments of progress and success.

Gender-imposed barriers choke the flow of communication in professional environments, and will do little good. They may keep a few men—and a lot of women—behind. For women business owners and entrepreneurs and other workers across job sectors, acknowledging and challenging these barriers, and the often-flawed assumptions that maintain them, will help move our nation towards equality and excellence in all industries.

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