

1. This is not a gender issue

Recently, I attended an online Health and Safety Course, which was as boring as it sounds. At one point, the presenter repeated *Health and Safety is about being healthy and safe* so many times I thought there had been a technical error. I suddenly perked up when she asked the floor a genuinely interesting question: why is it that construction workers don't follow protocol that they are aware about and capable of following? After a short but painful silence, answers started popping up in the Zoom chat: deadlines, budgets, pressure from clients, lack of resource. All correct, but I couldn't stop myself from thinking that we were missing an opportunity to dig a bit deeper into the wider context of these incidents. Is there not a layer of lad culture factoring in to at least some workplace injuries? I imagined typing the following answers into the chat box: bravado, not wanting to be told what to do, fear of being ridiculed by the delicate egos in charge of unsafe workplaces, boys-will-be-boys childhoods. I imagined asking the presenter for her take on the real risk of death posed by poor mental health in the soup of testosterone we call the construction industry. Instead I typed: "Lack of training?" Coward.

Later that week, I was out for dinner with some friends, who were meeting a guy I was dating for the first time. I was telling them that the only meaningful take home from this godforsaken course was that my workplace is legally obliged to provide me with steel-capped boots that fit. I was annoyed, because I've spent four years sloshing around in huge men's boots that people of all genders were expected to share at my workplace; thinking it was my fault for being too stingy to splash out on some size 8 Blundstones. My date interrupted me. "Come on," he said, "this is not a gender issue. Just put an extra pair of socks on!" I made a sassy clap back, my friends laughed. We all moved on.

But three hours (and a few drinks) later, in the back of an Uber, I decided to revisit his comment.

I started off attempting to have a constructive conversation, but quickly realised I was wildly out of control of my emotions. He immediately and unequivocally offered a dozen versions of an apology that would be more than sufficient under normal circumstances. He said I don't want to be like that, thank you for calling me out, don't let me be a dick. Unfortunately for both of us I was in a half-cut emotional free fall that wouldn't correct until the next morning. Don't let YOURSELF be a dick, I heard myself say.

2. Some context

A few months ago, a colleague asked me if I would like to teach a design paper with him on Artificial Intelligence, and the new role of the architect within this era. The premise was that students would start the paper by feeding a brief into the ether and selecting their favourite results. The design process would be one of curation, rather than generation, testing a potential future for this industry, and many others. My colleague's theory was that the resulting buildings would be awful and generic. His plan was that the students would then spend the second half of their semester designing a better response to the brief using their far superior brains, proving once and for all that human spaces need to be designed by humans. I didn't know what to say. I'm not sure what the future holds, but if I end up competing with a robot, I highly doubt I will win.

In its current iteration, AI is most useful to me as a sort of proofreader. On the first day I played with ChatGPT, I asked it to make an email about a concrete slab funny. The bot did a good job here, although I decided not to sign off with 'Yours in Hilarity and Construction,' in the end. I then asked it to make a site instruction more concise. The bot was incredible, my fluffy two-pager got boiled down to a few clear and polite bullet points.

The third thing I asked ChatGPT was to make an email sound more masculine. When the robot's reply appeared, I noticed a striking change of tone. My apologetic formality was replaced with casual confidence- "I have clarified with the Processing Officer that his concern is" became "I've touched base with the Processing Officer, and here's the deal:" All of my questions were turned into directives. "I thought I would check in with you before I respond in full, have you encountered a similar situation in the past?" became "It could be a solid fix, but I wanted to bounce it off you first." The tone was less

formal but also less friendly. The “Kind” was removed from my “Kind Regards.” I sent my original email.

None of this came as a surprise, there’s plenty of research proving how differently the same email is perceived depending on the gender or race of its sender. What shocked me is how quickly I’d asked a robot to help me be less feminine. Why was I asking the bot to help me navigate sexism, while my male colleague was coming up with ways to beat it? It’s hard to locate the precise moment that I stopped being an optimistic and empowered feminist, and started wondering whether I could move through the world a bit more like a man.

3. More tears

Let’s return to my late night meltdown, for a moment. What started as a reaction to a bad joke spiralled into a full review of every experience of sexism I could recall, a wine-induced purging of poison I didn’t even know I had retained.

I thought about the time someone took out a construction detail I had drawn, told me I probably wouldn’t understand it, but bear with me, and then (incorrectly) explained it to the men assembled at a meeting. I laughed it off, cried when I got home.

I thought about the year I spent collaborating with a consultant who undermined me relentlessly while I worked from home, disconnected from any voice of reason, or support. “A competent architect should recognise the limits of their capabilities and understand when they are out of their depth” was his response to a question he was too busy to answer. Despite his busyness, he found the time to type out another couple of paragraphs about my lack of ability. I immediately believed him, burst into tears of shame. Later I plucked up the courage to ask a more senior colleague for advice- he couldn’t answer my question, either. I still ruminated on it, becoming increasingly frustrated that I was able neither to clap back in anger nor shrug it off. My sadness felt horribly inappropriate in this professional context; I worried that being openly upset would prove him right about my incompetence. Sadness feels like the absorption of blame, anger its active rebuttal.

4. Stop whining

I’m going to cut myself off here. I don’t need to prove to anyone that sexism exists, and I’m getting better at dealing with these men, with their comments. Before the workboot incident, which is already an in-joke for all involved, I thought I’d made progress. I was even congratulated on my ability to “manage difficult relationships,” at my last annual review. I’m worried, though, that through this process of toughening up and learning to handle a hard-ass bloke, learning to laugh it off, I’ve lost something. It’s hard to pin down what it is that I’ve lost but I know that it is gentle and beautiful. I want it back, the empathy that used to soften my competitive edges, my ruthless wit.

In the meantime, I have forwarded a Bunnings receipt to my employer.