

MODULE

14

Attacks and Sexism

What the research says women should do
when the attack is personal

WHAT THIS MODULE COVERS

Women are held to a different standard, and a higher one. This module covers what the research actually shows about responding — and the finding that surprised the pollster who ran it.

Steve is asked this constantly by women he trains in business, law, education and politics: does being a woman change what I have to do? The answer is yes. As a rule, women face attacks and charges men do not. It is unfair. The world is improving — more women are being elected in the United States and worldwide, and some countries mandate male-female representation — but the standard remains higher.

Many of these attacks are sexist in nature: a male opponent or a male-dominated industry singling out a woman as not strong enough, lacking the demeanour, incapable. It is entirely false. It is also common.

The research behind this module traces to an incident perhaps fifteen or twenty years ago. A woman running for office in New York state was in a debate. Asked a question, her male opponent turned to her and said: *what are your measurements?* She was so disgusted she did not know how to respond, and said nothing — worried that responding would make her look bothered by it.

She later went to **Celinda Lake**, one of the best pollsters in the country and especially on women's issues, and asked whether she should have. Lake ran extensive research on the double standard and on sexist attacks specifically.

The finding was stunning. **If a woman does not respond, the attack hurts her more than it hurts the man who delivered it.** Her silence cost her more than his conduct cost him. Lake was surprised.

The follow-on research was definitive about what to do instead, and it is covered in the concepts below.

15-20

years of research
behind this

#1

finding: silence costs
her more

1984

Ferraro, the first
woman on a national

KEY CONCEPTS

Respond immediately

A sexist attack must be answered on the spot. Not later, not in a statement, not never. The research is unambiguous.

Call out the individual or group

Name what happened and name who did it. Do not leave it abstract.

Call on media and women's groups to condemn it

Bring outside weight to bear. Call on mainstream and social media to condemn it, and on women's organisations to do the same.

Put the onus back where it belongs

Rally, and move the burden onto the person who levelled the attack. Lake's research showed that doing this recovers what was lost and can produce net gain.

Character attacks versus policy disagreements

A disagreement about your position is one thing. An attack on who you are is another, and it must be answered. This principle applies to everyone, and it is covered further in Module 13.

FROM THE VIDEO**Geraldine Ferraro versus George H. W. Bush, 1984**

Ferraro was the first woman nominated for president or vice-president in American history. In the vice-presidential debate, Bush said: "let me help you with the difference, Mrs. Ferraro, between Iran and the embassy in Lebanon." Let me essentially school you on how this works. In 1984 it was unremarkable enough that he thought nothing of it.

He then went further, suggesting she and Mondale had said American servicemen "died in shame" — a character attack, not a policy disagreement.

Ferraro had no training and none of the research that exists today. Her response: "Let me just say, first of all, that I almost resent, Vice President Bush, your patronizing attitude that you have to teach me about foreign policy. I've been a member of Congress for six years." Then: "please don't categorize my answers either. Leave the interpretation of my answers to the American people who are watching this debate." Then: no one ever said those young men died in shame, and no parent of a nineteen or twenty-year-old would ever say that about anyone else's child.

Tested, it was close to the perfect answer. Do not school me — I have the experience. Do not put words in my mouth — the public will judge what I said. And shame on you for suggesting we do not care when someone's child dies. She wins big.

REMEMBER

- Silence after a sexist attack hurts you more than it hurts the attacker.
- Respond immediately. Name it. Name them.
- Call on media and outside groups to condemn it — do not carry it alone.
- Handled correctly, you recover what was lost and can end up ahead.

PRACTICE

Exercises

Type directly into the shaded boxes below and save the file. Come back to your answers after you have practised — this is your record of what changed.

EXERCISE 1

Prepare your response in advance

The candidate in New York froze because she had never imagined the question. Preparation is what prevents that.

What is the attack you would least expect and least want to face? Write it out in the words someone might actually use.

Write your immediate response. Name what happened, name the person, and put the burden back on them.

Say it aloud until your voice stays steady. How many attempts did it take?

EXERCISE 2**Study the Ferraro structure**

Her answer has three distinct moves. Learn them as a template.

MOVE ONE — do not school me, here is my experience. Write yours.

MOVE TWO — do not characterise my answers, others will judge. Write yours.

MOVE THREE — shame on you for the implication. Write yours.

EXERCISE 3**Separate character from policy**

You can sometimes let a policy disagreement go. You cannot let a character attack go.

List the criticisms you actually face. Mark each one C for character or P for policy.

Which of the C items have you been letting slide? What will you do differently?

Tick each one once you have done it:

- ☐ Wrote out my hardest attack
 - ☐ Drafted the three-move response
 - ☐ Practised it aloud
 - ☐ Sorted my criticisms into character and policy
-

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

One thing from this module I will use the next time I speak:

When and where I will use it: