

Shake Hands, Don't Kiss!

Dear Stephen:

I am a fairly successful saleswoman in my early 40s. In my current position, I have noticed when my boss is at a sales meeting — or any group meeting really — he has a habit of shaking all of the men's hands and then hugging or even kissing the women at the end of his presentations. He has done this even with clients who he does not know particularly well. When I started my career, this sort of behavior was the norm and even expected, but I have noticed younger women are far less OK with it than I ever was. And I'm beginning to think they're right.

Why do men feel they can shake hands or fist bump one another while women must be hugged and kissed on the cheek? With the strength of the modern women's movement and all of the #MeToo stuff on the internet, how does this kind of behavior still stand?

To be honest, I am a little bit appalled with myself that I never noticed how wrong this all

was until fairly recently. I once thought this was some kind of special treatment I was getting and that a hug or even a kiss was a sign of additional appreciation, better than just a simple handshake. But now, every time I am hugged in the workplace, all I see is yet another gender barrier I am forced to overcome.

It sounds a bit silly now that I am writing it out, but on top of everything it is the cold and flu season, and I am not getting sick just because my boss decided it was courtly to give me a kiss on the cheek!

How do I send a subtle message to my boss and other men that I work with that I want no part of being hugged and kissed. I don't want to feel obnoxious, but they should shake my hand just like everybody else.

Give Me A Hand



You can send your workplace questions to Stephen at: StephenSays@bellow.press

Questions selected to be answered, will appear in this column. Please use the Subject: Stephen Says for all emails. Stephen Viscusi is a bestselling author, television personality, and CEO of The Viscusi Group, global executive recruiters located in New York. Follow Stephen on Twitter @stephenviscusi, Like Stephen on Facebook; and follow him on LinkedIn.

Dear Give Me A Hand,

I hear you, and I have received dozens of questions on this topic in various forms over the last few months. You are not alone!

The general answer is plain and simple. Women should be greeted and thanked in exactly the same manner as their male counterparts. Traditionally, this means a firm handshake while looking your colleague directly in the eyes. A handshake allows for two things: First, and most importantly, it offers the opportunity to make eye contact and thus strengthen personal connections. Second, a firm handshake

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(regardless of gender) denotes power and resolve, essential for business success.

Of course, the whole hug and kiss on the cheek is a power play in its own right. A hug is a nice way to show intimacy for a friend, but in the workplace, it is a clear sign of disrespect. There might be exceptions, but as a greeting, it almost always demeans and dismisses the seriousness of the person who is hugged. The man who initiates the hug is sending a clear message he doesn't take you as seriously.

I understand it might seem like a harmless, anachronistic relic of a different time. The point, though, is that when it was appropriate to greet women with formal kisses in the workplace, there were no women in positions of power in those workplaces. Surely, that tells us all we need to know about how inappropriate this is today.

As a germaphobe myself, I also sympathize with your point that it's just gross, too.

Ok, now we've established this behavior is both sexist and outdated. But how do you make sure it stops without causing too much of a scene? Try this: Next time your boss is making the rounds, put your right hand out before he even has the chance to move in for the hug, look him in the eye, take his hand, and just shake. I'll bet a fair sum your boss will be a bit taken aback, but I'll bet even more money he just shakes your hand instead of hugging you. Mission accomplished.

I'll add for the sake of transparency that as a man I do understand the habitual element of these greetings. Chances are, if you are over 40, you're used to hugging women. That is simply the way a lot of us were raised. Well, if you are a man reading

this, just know I understand this may be tough, but get over it. No ifs, buts or further discussion. Your re-adjustment isn't comparable to women's discomfort. It is our responsibility to support gender equality at all levels, and it starts with the the greeting.

So, Give Me A Hand, just know your boss and male colleagues might be a little uncomfortable at first, but they will get used to it. I agree with you wholeheartedly. Who wants somebody embracing them so closely and pecking them on the cheek at work? Of course, this is OK with friends and family, even the occasional client (especially those from France or southern Europe) will look to greet you with kiss on the cheek. But in the U.S., it is our custom to shake hands in business. You deserve to be treated no differently.

Stephen