Nasty WOMAN

OR:

HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE BEING *Abrasive*

When I first batted this talk idea around most of the women I pitched it to said "do you really see yourself as abrasive?"

Most of the men I talked to said "Wow, cool talk title."

And this is kind of the core of the problem, right? A lot of people don't even interrogate why or how terms like this are used, and what their implications might be. And if you *do* think about it, it's probably because you've been called it or affected by a double standard that makes you think twice about the way we refer to people.

Abrasive is a word that doesn't have a consistent meaning and is used primarily to shame women for speaking on behalf of themselves. And I used to be *terrified* of being perceived as abrasive. I was mortified when a couple of my former coworkers referred to me as "uppity".

Talk about the story of my interview for my first tech job and how it was related by a DBC classmate to the interviewers that I'm uppity, and it was seen as a charming quirk by the interviewers, so they decided to give me a shot.

@JLUNREIN | #DBCWOMENSDAY

My name is Jess Unrein. Here's my twitter handle and the hashtag for today's event. If you have questions, comments, or would like to tell me how I'm wrong, please tweet at me. I love talking about this stuff.

I'm a software engineer at Sprout Social, and in the 8 months I've been working there, none of my coworkers has called me abrasive to my face.

This is progress. Using coded language like this often says more about the person saying those words than the person being described.

RED FLAG WORDS 😒

- Uppity
- Spunky
- Abrasive
- Frigid
- Cheeky
- Brave

Some of these don't seem so bad. Like, why would anyone object to being called brave? Why was it such a bad idea in retrospect that I worked with people who were chuffed to have hired an uppity woman?

These words are insidious. They're demeaning. Would someone who calls me brave for giving technical talks say the same thing to a man presenting at a conference?

Each of these hides an implication that you differ from the way they thought your skills and strengths would manifest.

DOES IT GET BETTER?

The words and the perceptions don't go away. But you *can* get stronger. It doesn't happen automatically and you have to work like hell at it, but it can happen.

The thing is, there will always be people who do not like interacting with you. You can't avoid the fact that people will want to avoid you. But you can choose to position yourself so that you're alienating the right people and drawing the right people in.

THAT'S NOT *on* *brand* FOR ME

I cuss like a sailor. I'm unlikely to soften my opinions for the sake of people around me. I know how to be diplomatic, but often I choose not to. The people around me rarely afford me that courtsey, and they respect me less when I try.

About a year ago, when my parents or sometimes my boss would chastise me for "unladylike language," I started saying things like, "I could tone down my speech, but that's really not on brand for me."

At first I was mostly joking. It started as a private joke in my head about how people perceive millennials and personal branding. But after I started saying it more and more, it started to become true. I've set the expectation that I'm a bit coarse, but I'm straightforward and honest. That I'm an okay listener and I give great advice, but I'm not going to soften the edges for you. The more I told people that's who I am, the more it just started being true, and now my parents don't even wince when I say "motherfucker" in front of them anymore. It's part of my brand, and my brand protects me.

HUG THE DRAMA LLAMA

Drama is a word I've grown to hate.

Drama is a word we use to shut down our empathy. It's a word we use as a placeholder to define behavior and reactions to problems that we don't want to understand. And I get it. We each only have so many fucks to give.

But "drama" and "dramatic" tends to be words reserved for women and LGBTQ folks when they're getting upset about how they're treated. It's a word that, in my experience, gets used more frequently as a person who's being "dramatic" encounters more and more intersections of marginalization.

You don't have to care about every problem. But we need to stop using these words that shut down empathy, compassion, and communication.

I OFTEN FAIL

So I'm weird and coarse and sometimes unpleasant. But I still get talked over. People still dismiss me. People get exhausted with how many opinions I have and the fact that I'm not afraid of voicing them.

And sometimes it still hurts. I'm not sure the initial sting of learning someone dislikes you for your opinions and your strengths ever goes away. But you learn to get over it and dismiss the haters quicker.

Other times still, I just can't muster the energy to fight back when people are talking over me. Or when they shout me down.

The reason I described everything above as a personal brand and not my personality is because my brand is my sheild. But I don't always have the energy to block every attack, and sometimes the petty shit still gets to me.

AND THAT'S OKAY

But you know what? One of the ways I started loving myself and embracing the path forward to brash, brassy, unflappable me is to realize that I'm human too. I have feelings and they can be hurt. And that's a good thing. It's the root of my empathy and what I draw on when I see others get beaten down.

Failure is part of growing. I would never have learned or changed if I hadn't been burned over and over again. And that's what I hope for all of you. That the times when it gets to be too much help teach you your limits and illuminate the path forward to embracing the things that make you different. There are people out there like you. You don't have to bear every defeat or disapointment alone. Let's be abrasive together.