

When ‘Going Along with the Crowd’ Goes Off Course

By Mermer Blakeslee

Back in the mid-80s when I was becoming an examiner, I was a single mom “living by the seat of my pants,” as my mother constantly reminded me. “You pay more for daycare than you earn teaching,” she’d say.

Even the tools of my trade were beyond my means. I’d been given a pair of skis, but boots were harder to come by. A ski-racing friend offered, and I accepted, an old but never-used, three-buckle recreational boot. The word *buckle* was an exaggeration, it was simply a wire. One day while I was understudying an exam prep clinic, the middle wire broke and the top wire stretched to the point of uselessness. I had to ski holding my right foot and tip off the snow so the entire ski/boot combo didn’t fly off my foot.

Shortly afterwards, I was “saved” by a smart, kind man who gave me some *real* boots and convinced the company he worked for to sponsor me with “product” – the first time I heard that use of the word. I was elated and indebted.

Fast forward a couple years. I was now an examiner and coach of the Eastern Division Development Team, although still a single mom and still (viscerally!) attached to my boot company. One evening, the company

sponsored a dinner for the three examiners who skied in their boots and some company reps; one of whom was going to foam a new pair of boots for me. Again, I was flooded by indebtedness: *A really fine – and free – meal! With really fine wine!*

THE CHASM BETWEEN US

We went together – about 10 men and me – to *The Hermitage*, a fancy, historic place about five miles from Mt. Snow, Vermont. We were given a private, charmingly cozy room and I sat next to my “savior,” the respected elder of the group. My two fellow examiners were the only other ones I knew. The wine flowed. The prices on the menu dazzled. I ordered an appetizer *and* an entree. I was going to eat enough to last the rest of the week.

My two examiner friends were asked about their businesses, their families, their houses; no one asked me a thing. Did I care? Well, yes, but I was getting my boots foamed the next day... so I kept quiet.

Shortly after our meals arrived, my dinner companions started passing around a sheet of paper; each guy in turn taking it, chuckling, laughing, chuckling again. A list of jokes, I figured, some lines apparently funnier than others. I could tell some of the men across the table already knew what was on that paper by their boyish grins and furtive looks at me, sitting there waiting my turn.

Why are bicycles better to ride than women?

I got to the line: *Because they never get sore... and passed it on.* They were all looking at me. *Is she cool? It’s funny, right?* I stayed excruciatingly careful about my mouth; determined that it not betray my feelings.

And what *were* my feelings? The most visceral I’m embarrassed to write but that’s, unfortunately, the point. I was suddenly aware of my vagina and that I was the only one in that room who had one. And that each man staring at me was aware of that anatomical distinction. Needless to say, I wanted to disappear.

But I couldn’t, as anyone who has been in a similar situation knows. What if I left... then what? Hitch a ride or walk the five miles back to our hotel in the freezing December night? Go eat alone at the bar?

The author, working with her group at the 2019 Women’s Summit.



SHERRI HARKIN

Then, my seat empty, I'd be one of *those* women, those soft, feeling types who can't take a joke. Would I be called a kill-joy... or worse?

Could I have tried to say what I felt? Joke about it? I was usually well-armed with humor, but where would I start? The gap was too great between their mentality and

mine, so I felt that no matter what I did, I'd fall into the chasm between us.

I say *their* mentality – as if it were collective. I might have been able to speak to any *one* of those men, but not to all 10 at once. Group-think often succumbs to dumb-think. Most likely a few of the men were extremely uncomfortable (in fact, I found out later that

one of my fellow examiners was) but they were *men*, and silent, so I couldn't see that my friend sat over there, my mentor there, perhaps an ally sat next to me.

There was no *wè* left, we who shared this alpine passion. No, I saw them as *them*. They did nothing. I did nothing. We all acted in an exceedingly normal way. I picked up my fork and was determined to finish my meal.

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Events like the Women's Summit seek to inspire attendees and promote professional opportunities for women in the traditionally male-dominated snowsports industry.



HOW THE EXPERIENCE CHANGED ME

When I got back to my room, I first called a girlfriend and then my boyfriend (who eventually became my husband). As I told each of them the story, I found myself needing the clarity of their anger, leaning on it. But the next day I did get my new boots foamed... so is that a happy ending?

In one way it was. As I metabolized the experience, my awareness of what happened deepened and started to change me – and that's a verb I use sparingly.

First, as the Development Team Coach, I realized I hadn't been empathetic enough toward some of the women on the team. It took being caught at that table with my head down over my plate (or, when I lifted it, faking a smile) to feel the powerlessness some of my Development-teamers had undoubtedly experienced.

Until that dinner, I'd thought it was doable, if not easy, for a woman on the Development Team to stand up for herself and even use the sexism as an opportunity to educate. I did quite often, so why couldn't they? For example, when a male instructor in my clinic would ask me if he could tell a "sexy" joke, and I'd say, "Sure, as long as it's not sexist, racist, or homophobic." Once he figured out that I was saying, "Sexism is not sexy," and evaluated the joke, in almost every case he refrained from telling it.

What I didn't understand was that I could *only* confront overt sexism in my predominantly male groups because I was wearing an examiner jacket; I was in a position of power. The women on the Development Team were not. It was my status that enabled me, not some sort of personal strength or skill I could coach. Power is a state of being that looks obvious to everyone on the outside, but it often creates a blindspot in our psyches, even if we have good intentions.

That feeling of powerlessness is rooted in a steady barrage of aggressions and micro-aggressions, each a pinprick deflating and demeaning women as people or athletes or teachers. And because some of the aggressions are "micro," each slight seems too small to fret about... which is why the accumulation has a gaslighting effect – making

MAKING A STAND AND STANDING UP FOR EACH OTHER ARE BEAUTIFUL – AND NECESSARY – ACTS.

her feel like *she's* the crazy one, the too-sensitive softie or the hard-hearted b- - -. That's why I'm telling this particular story and not a horrific one; it's a common, everyday form of boys-will-be-boys. Boys with an attitude of "What do you expect? You're in *our* world."

THE DANGER OF GROUP-THINK

The day after that dinner, I talked to my two fellow examiners. The first – one of my mentors – was so mad at himself for not saying something he could barely sleep. The other guy – a friend, younger, brash, very honest, and very earnest – needed more help understanding my predicament. But he

genuinely wanted to know and was no prude, so I said, "Imagine you're the only man at a table full of women giggling hysterically about not only 'sizes and shapes,' but how things can go so very wrong – all just in fun, right? – erectile dysfunction, premature..." I couldn't even finish the sentence because I could tell he was feeling as uncomfortable as I had the night before. "Ah, Merm," he said, "I get it. Wow. I wasn't there for you. I'm sorry." He really *was* a dear; his forthrightness about his own cluelessness one of his charms.

I realized if I were a man, I might have sat there in silence too. Embarrassed for the woman, yes, uncomfortable, yes, but staying under the radar, because, well, we were getting new boots! And this dinner! I'd probably think, "Oh, I'll talk to her tomorrow about these guys." Hadn't I also been clueless about the role of power, the power I didn't know I had as an examiner? It can be insidiously easy to be unaware of the power you have solely by virtue of being part of a dominant group. Did my mentor know that simply because he was a man he had the power to help me by speaking up? And was he aware that I (although usually assertive)

could *not* speak for myself, mainly because I was a single woman among many men? No, not until later when he was free of the group-think.

I'm white, certainly part of a predominant group in the world of snowsports, and I still cringe when I think of one time in particular when I sat in silence. Behind closed doors, a coach made a racist comment about a student to a few other colleagues, "just joking," of course. I didn't laugh but I didn't speak up. I was blind to my own power to make a stand, and so, like my two examiner friends, I acted the coward in the face of the group.

Making a stand and standing up for each other are beautiful – and necessary – acts. And they demand trust, emotional intelligence, empathy, and self-awareness, all now part of our instructor development with the Learning Connection Model. So yes, this story *can* lead to a happy ending. That's because awareness – even in small doses – keeps giving and keeps teaching as long as we, *all of us*, are genuinely earnest about respecting and connecting with each other and our guests... and overcoming our own cluelessness. **32**

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HOW TO INTERVENE

The accompanying article calls upon instructors and others in the snowsports community to be more mindful about standing up for each other in the face of inappropriate behavior or actions. So, how do you do that?

As part of "Civility and Anti-Harassment" webinar training conducted for PSIA-AASI education leaders in November, Oregon-based Respect Outside recommended the following strategies to intervene directly, indirectly, or through distraction to address anything from micro-aggressions to overt harassment. Bystander intervention is encouraged because it helps prevent harassment, which improves the work culture for everyone.

FOUR D'S OF ACTIVE BYSTANDER INTERVENTION

DISTRACT

Strike up an unrelated conversation to change the subject and stop any potential offensive conduct.

DELAY SUPPORT

Wait for the offending party to leave and then check in with the co-worker or colleague and give support.

DELEGATE

Get help from others with authority.

DIRECT INTERVENTION

Directly speak to the offending person.