

## **What Not to Wear** | Diane Paddison

. . . at work

My friend and fellow executive looked slightly sheepish as he came into my office and closed the door. As soon as I saw him, I knew what was coming.

"Diane," he said with a pained expression, "I have to ask you to talk to one of my people."

I nodded, "Okay. Who is it, and what is she wearing?"

As one of few female executives in what is still a male-dominated industry, I've been called on countless times by male colleagues to speak to female employees about appropriate work attire. I've had awkward talks with women about casual clothes, tight clothes, ruffled clothes, short skirts, too much makeup, too much cleavage, overdone hair, over-dyed hair, and much more.

### **Uncomfortable conversations**

Despite what some of my male counterparts seem to think, the fact that I'm a woman doesn't necessarily make it easy to talk to another woman about her appearance at work. But if someone has taken the trouble to come to me on her behalf, I know it's important that she hear this feedback, so I push past the awkwardness and endeavor to deliver my message in the most positive and encouraging way I can.

These kinds of talks are hard and they don't always go well. The best experiences I've had come when I'm able to establish a level of connection and trust with the person so that they feel safe and supported rather than judged. So I always arrange to meet in person and privately, outside of work. If I don't already know the woman personally, I make an effort to get to know her and to share some of myself as well.

Then I start with the facts. I note the incredible power of first impressions and how they are based mostly on visual cues like your appearance and body language. I share with the person that someone has come to me with an issue related to her appearance, and, as kindly as possible, I get very specific and direct about what that issue is. I try to offer clear, practical guidance about what she can do differently and I make clear that this feedback is coming from senior-level colleagues who care about her and her career. Invariably, the woman asks who that colleague is, but I never tell. It's uncomfortable.

More than anything, I try to leave the person feeling like I'm in her corner. I've learned to expect the person to be sensitive at first—I certainly would be! But I know I've been successful when I see the person make positive changes and when she returns my smile, sometimes even with a twinkle in her eye.

### **Wait—Isn't this male chauvinism?**

In the vast majority of cases when men asked me to talk to someone on their behalf, I can honestly say that the men were respectful and professional. They valued the contributions their

female employees were making, and they were coming to me for help because they wanted to see these women do well in their careers.

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I know many women who nevertheless bristle at this kind of wardrobe intervention. To some women, it feels like office dress codes are a way that men try to control or objectify women, or it may feel like they're giving in to chauvinism. Others simply want to be free to wear what they like without having to worry about what other people think. Our outward appearance, after all, is a form of self-expression.

### **Ditch the distractions**

I sympathize! I bristle at chauvinism too. But I dress modestly and conservatively for work, and I don't worry too much about how that might be tamping down my femininity or self-expression. I'm a practical sort of person, and the practical reality is that many men—and some women too—find certain visual cues wildly distracting. And distractions hurt. They can—fairly or unfairly—skew people's perceptions of your capabilities and character. Further, distractions make it harder for people to understand and retain what you are saying.

My friend Shaunti Feldhahn illustrated this beautifully with a study she conducted for her book, *The Male Factor*. She developed two short videos showing the same attractive businesswoman giving identical informative presentations. The woman wears the same suit in both videos, but in one, her wrap-style blouse is pulled down low, revealing her cleavage. In the other, no cleavage. Men were randomly assigned a version of the video, and then tested on the content of the speech. The majority of men who viewed the "cleavage version" could not identify the presenter's name from a multiple-choice list. On average, they remembered 25 percent less about the content of her speech than the men who viewed the other version.

When I'm at work, I can't afford that. I need to be effective and efficient. *I need to get work done*. If a few simple clothing, hair, and makeup choices can help me to do that, I'll happily make them.

### **Clothes vs. calling**

What is important to me is the work that God has called me to do. I want to honor God's gifts by serving God to my fullest capacity. And so I consciously make choices about my appearance that best enable me to do that. In the traditional and formal corporate setting where I've spent most of my career, that means clean, pressed, well-tailored business suits with closed-toed shoes and a modest blouse. I generally choose muted colors, especially if I'm meeting with mostly men. I have straight, shoulder-length hair and I tend to leave it down, curled under at the ends but not falling in my face or eyes. I usually wear small earrings, a simple necklace, wedding ring, and just enough makeup to look professional. No flashy colors, patterns, or jewelry. No cleavage. Not too much leg. Nothing fussy. Nothing that could be considered tight or curve-hugging.

Not every workplace calls for muted suits. The key is to figure out what is appropriate for your workplace and avoid being a distraction. I happen to love bright colors, and when I'm working in a more relaxed setting or giving a speech to a group of women, I tend to opt for cheery blues and purples. If you work at a tech startup and all your coworkers wear jeans and T-shirts, then go for it. But even in the most casual of offices, you need to present yourself as clean and well-groomed, and remain sensitive to the "distraction factor" of tight-fitting clothing or too much skin.

If you're having trouble figuring out the appropriate dress code for your office, look at women you admire in the company, pay close attention to what they wear and how they present themselves, and model your look after them.

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Does this sound boring to you? My daughters would probably say yes. I have to say, though, it doesn't *feel* boring! By getting the distractions out of the way, I make room for my energy and ideas and hard work to shine through. I feel confident and powerful walking into a room knowing that I will be heard.

Thinking carefully about how you present yourself at work and—when appropriate—encouraging others to do the same, will help you to pursue your calling and make the most of your God-given gifts in the marketplace.

Diane Paddison is a business professional and founder of [4wordwomen.org](http://4wordwomen.org), local groups of professional working women committed to faith, family, work, and each other.