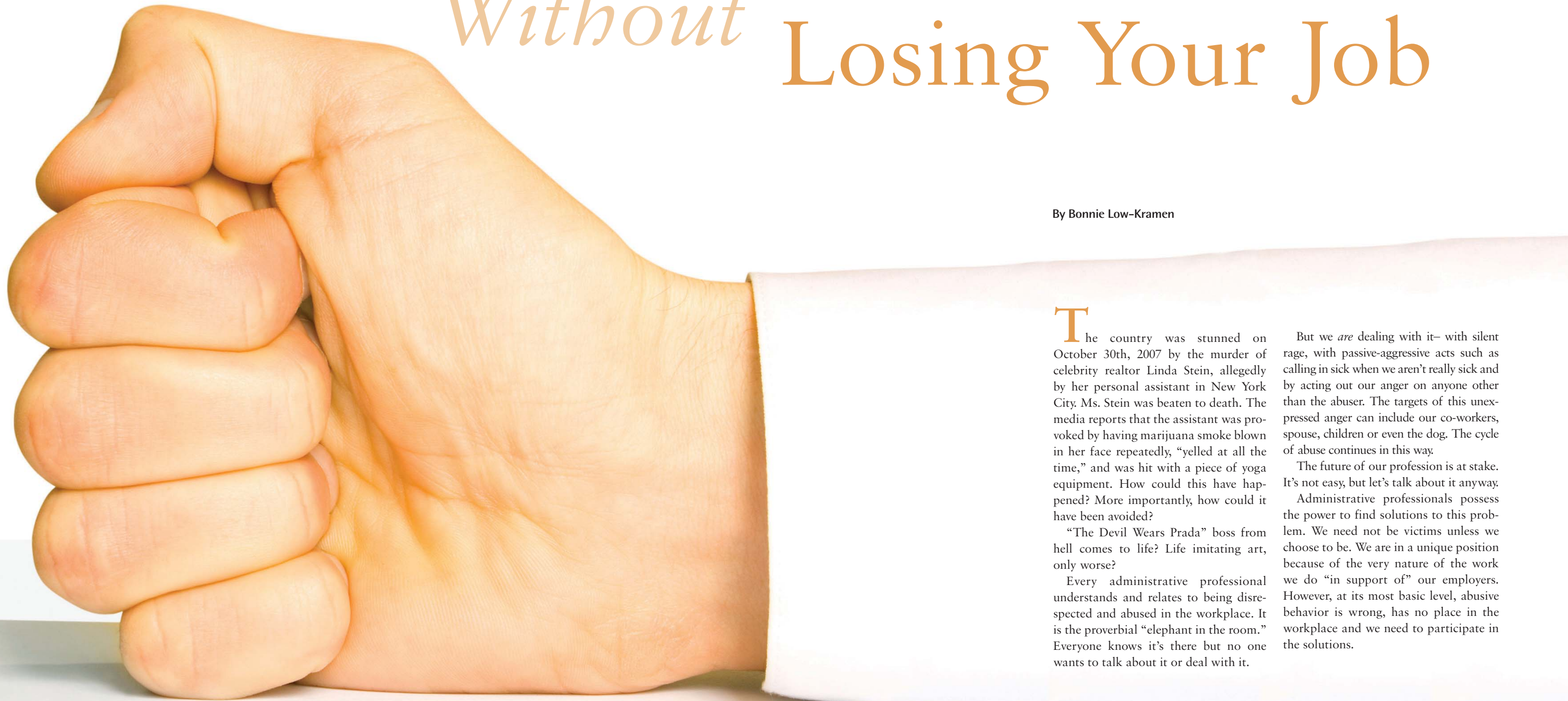


How to Stand **UP** For Yourself *Without* Losing Your Job



By Bonnie Low-Kramen

The country was stunned on October 30th, 2007 by the murder of celebrity realtor Linda Stein, allegedly by her personal assistant in New York City. Ms. Stein was beaten to death. The media reports that the assistant was provoked by having marijuana smoke blown in her face repeatedly, “yelled at all the time,” and was hit with a piece of yoga equipment. How could this have happened? More importantly, how could it have been avoided?

“The Devil Wears Prada” boss from hell comes to life? Life imitating art, only worse?

Every administrative professional understands and relates to being disrespected and abused in the workplace. It is the proverbial “elephant in the room.” Everyone knows it’s there but no one wants to talk about it or deal with it.

But we *are* dealing with it— with silent rage, with passive-aggressive acts such as calling in sick when we aren’t really sick and by acting out our anger on anyone other than the abuser. The targets of this unexpressed anger can include our co-workers, spouse, children or even the dog. The cycle of abuse continues in this way.

The future of our profession is at stake. It’s not easy, but let’s talk about it anyway.

Administrative professionals possess the power to find solutions to this problem. We need not be victims unless we choose to be. We are in a unique position because of the very nature of the work we do “in support of” our employers. However, at its most basic level, abusive behavior is wrong, has no place in the workplace and we need to participate in the solutions.

The givens:

95% of the 4.1 million administrative professionals in America are women. Women are socialized as young girls to not assert themselves or be confrontational. To assert and confront are nearly impossible assignments for many women. Just ask. What you'll literally hear is, "I would do anything to not have to confront someone." The reason for this is because our societal training is so deep-seated.

The good news is the word "nearly." Women in the workplace, especially ones who have been promoted into management, have learned the ways to positively confront people. The results? They get what they want and need and instead of making people angry, everyone is calmer because of the clarity which comes as a byproduct of honest communication.



Respect from others in the workplace begins with self-respect.

Ways to Garner Respect:

1. Begin with your cover letter and resume

These materials are your first contact with the workplace. Make clear that being an administrative professional is your "career" rather than your "job." Include a professional objective. The words you choose matter in order to communicate your professionalism, your desire to seek excellence and the seriousness with which you view your role.

Take great care with these documents because they paint a picture of who you are and offer a first impression before you even get a chance to walk through the door. No typos, no grammatical errors. Letter-perfect materials are the first step to achieving respect.

2. E-Mail communications

All e-mails to managers and co-workers should be professionally written. You are being judged on every one. You can tell a lot about someone you've never met by the way they communicate in e-mail!

3. The interview(s)

Your prospective employer's HR people were impressed enough by your materials to bring you in for an interview. You will now be evaluated by how you dress and conduct yourself. Self respect is evidenced by the way you speak, what you

say and how you say it. Practice. Prepare a story for everything on your resume. These stories reveal your values and what matters to you.

Self respect is about viewing yourself as the solution to someone else's problem and presenting yourself as such. You bring experience, skills, and intelligence

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to the table and you get to evaluate whether their assignment is a good match for your talents and vice versa.

Interview them as much as they are interviewing you. Ask questions such as: *Why did the last assistant leave? Is this a non-smoking office? Will I be on-call 24/7? Is any travel involved? How are expenses reimbursed?* Asking these questions will help you to better evaluate the position and at the same time, communicate self respect.

You will probably have more than one interview. Handle each one as a top priority and be prepared with stories which communicate the ways in which you do

your best work. Say things like, "I enjoy being part of a team where the only agenda is getting the job done. I have a hard time in an environment where there is screaming and gossip." See the reaction.

4. Your manager

You have opportunities from your very first interaction with him or her to command respect. It is possible to command respect without being abrasive or unpleasant. In fact, it works better to be simple, honest, pleasant and direct. Use humor. Kiddingly say, "You're not a screamer, are you?"

He or she will ask you about former situations which will help you garner respect. Be honest and state the ways in which you work well such as; *I am very self-motivated. If you give me access to you and let me know what you want the end result to be, I'll run with it.* Or; *How do you prefer we communicate on a daily basis? How about when we are on deadline and in a crunch? Do you prefer some other way in those situations?* These discussions set the groundwork for reasonable expectations and mutual respect.

5. Day to Day Behavior

Respect is garnered by taking initiative and being a part of the solution, not the problem. Offer a suggestion or an idea

about something you have observed or know is a burning issue. If you are going to raise an issue, be prepared with one or more possible solutions. Present this to your manager in writing or verbally. Setting a high standard for yourself garners respect from co-workers and managers. Make others look good and it will come back to you. Be generous with praise, credit, information and resources. Helping others even when it is not your job garners respect as well as being the "go-to" person in a crunch.

6. When abuses occur

As unpleasant as this is, handle it immediately. Don't assume it is an isolated incident. In general, if abuse happens once, it will probably happen again.

Verbal Abuse

Your manager uses profanity, is screaming, or is otherwise demeaning towards you.

Response Options: Calmly get up and say, "I cannot work with you if you are screaming. I'll be at my desk." Or: "I know you are stressed out, but you cannot speak to me in that way." Then leave

the room or the space for a few minutes. You are clarifying your limits and boundaries in this way. Do you risk being fired? Of course, but it's worth the risk if you are a valuable assistant. Give your manager a chance to cool off and see what happens.

Sexual Harassment

This can be subtle or overt, but it is very common. Harassment can range from seemingly innocent comments about the way you look in that outfit to blatant demands for sex.

Response Options: Respect comes from confronting the offender by directly saying, "Your behavior is inappropriate and unacceptable to me. I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt that you didn't know how I would respond. However, that will be the last time. If it happens again, I will report you. Any questions?" Wait for an answer and walk away.

Physical Abuse

Your manager or a co-worker assaults you in some way.

Response Options: Yell, run and call security.

Other methods of dealing with abusive language and behavior are to write a note expressing your feelings, to ask a peer of your supervisor to speak to him or her on your behalf, or to raise the issue with the HR staff. Resigning and/or pressing charges is always an option, albeit a wholly unpleasant, time-consuming, emotionally draining and potentially expensive one.

Abusive behavior is rooted in about having power and wielding that power in a disrespectful way. Administrative professionals possess great power to affect the workplace and their own experience in a positive way by standing up for what is right and commanding respect. Not only will you not lose your job, you will probably end up being promoted.

It could be murder to wait.

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