

Advice from the Trenches: The Prom King

Dear C and Dr. B:

I was at an office party with about twelve people who'd been talking, laughing and making jokes for over an hour. The elevator door opened - it was the bookkeeper, Pam, and her husband Steve. They were dressed in their formal best, and they really did look much nicer than the rest of us - I think they'd come straight from a wedding. In a jovial, friendly state, I expressed my delight with their fancy attire: "Look, it's the prom king and the prom queen!"

I'd meant it as a compliment, and everyone else laughed and said "Looking good, Steve!" And I thought that was the end of it. But no.

Steve worked at TicketMaster and the next week, I went to the store and bought tickets for a big concert in Boston. Steve was a friend, so I hoped he'd get me good seats. Well, not only did he get me bad ones, they were in the very top row balcony in a corner behind a support beam. I couldn't see a damn thing.

Pam said knew nothing about it, but she could guess why he did it. Apparently, Steve had a humiliating experience at his high school prom and never got over it. When I made the prom king comment and everyone else laughed, he thought we were all making fun of him.

What the hell!!! How on earth could he have gotten so screwed up over something I meant as a compliment? This really bugs me - I'm not the kind of person who would ever make fun of someone else! I want to set it straight with Steve, but Pam says it's better to let it be. What do you think?

- Misunderstood Michelle

Dr. B says:

In our culture what people say and how it is understood are out of sync. Deborah Tannen, Professor of linguistics at Georgetown University, devoted her entire career to this subject. Her audiobook, *That's Not What I Meant!*, is a must for everyone.

If there's a crowded party, and especially if people are drinking, it sets the stage for misunderstandings. Sometimes it's not what you say but how you say it. Humans interpret language mostly nonverbally, from tone, stance, posture, etc. Our current cultural climate is very me-centered - combine that with the fact that our personal connections have become largely virtual and our non verbal language skills have been diminished, and the result is that our baseline anxiety has only gotten worse.

You certainly can confront Steve and try to explain your intent but often this doesn't help and can actually make things worse. You could also report his behavior to his superiors - being petty and treating customers poorly are grounds for getting fired. But retaliation seldom makes anything better either. Life is often unfair and there is little if any justice in this world so before you choose to say or do anything consider what you hope to accomplish. If it will improve your life and if your behavior is likely to actually accomplish your intent, then go ahead. Consider this before you try talking to Steve. Will it

improve your life? If not, you can do as Pam says and just let it go.

C says:

People hear what they expect to hear. If Steve was traumatized by his prom experience, the very mention of the word prom would distort anything else that you said. So, instead of hearing a compliment, he heard mockery. He didn't hear "Looking good, Steve!" He only heard the laughter.

Sometimes one can simply say hello in a friendly tone of voice, and receive a snarling, "What did you mean by THAT?" in return. Don't blame yourself. The statement you made wouldn't have upset or offended anyone who'd had a good time at their prom. If you meant it as a compliment, I doubt if your tone was sneering or sarcastic. Quite honestly, Steve's actions are what disturb me. That was a pretty mean thing to do and it was very deliberate.

If you see Steve again, act like nothing ever happened. Better yet, don't see Steve again. Problem solved.

- Cathren Housley

You can visit Dr. B's blog at drbrilliantcliche.wordpress.com