

Master suppression techniques and how to neutralise them

'Master suppression techniques' is a collective term for a range of practices. As a rule, they are used by an individual or group to make another individual – representing a specific group – feel small or to keep that person 'in place'. These techniques take many different forms, from light banter to outright oppression.

Here, we look at suppression techniques from a gender perspective. But they are found in groups of all types, regardless of gender. They are not always deliberate – but the result may be highly destructive nevertheless. Those who are exposed to them for long enough find it hard to withstand the pressure. Eventually, they may cave in. At a workplace, this may cause victims to quit. Perhaps that was the whole idea?

But such techniques can be fought. The first step is to identify and familiarise oneself with some of the most common practices and the mechanisms behind them. They are always a result of some kind of structural problem, even when they are aimed at a particular individual. The 'oppressor' is probably afraid. Afraid of being knocked off his perch in the organisation, of being overtaken on the career path or of being exposed for lack of competence. Or the person may quite simply be afraid of the change that could result from a 'new type' of employee entering the workplace and making an impact. Someone who feels threatened often moves onto the attack.

Simply disarming or neutralising the 'oppressor' for the time being may not be enough. But it's a good way of bringing into the open a problem that may have become firmly entrenched at the workplace. Humour is often a good way of disarming the situation, of 'giving as good as you get'.

But irony, too, can often get you far. Too far, perhaps. Wounding someone who has wounded you seldom leads to constructive, forward-looking solutions.

If the attempt at suppression involves a direct attack on your person, and this happens time and again, one approach is to call a meeting and raise the matter in the group. That doesn't help? Then demand that people higher up in the organisation intervene and take responsibility for the matter. Outside help may be needed to deal with conflicts that have become rancorous.

Here we present nine of the most common master suppression techniques, their adverse effects and suggestions for how to deal with them!

These are the sources on which this text are based:

Ås, Berit: Kvinnor tillsammans. Handbok i frigörelse

Ås, Berit: Master Suppression Techniques,

<http://kilden.forskningsradet.no/oversikter/ht/engelsk.htm> Hedlund, Gun: Det handlar om prioriteringar – Kvinnors villkor och intressen i lokal politik

Wahl, Anna and Holgersson, Charlotte, Höök, Pia: Ironi och sexualitet.



1. Making others invisible

Others don't listen to what you have to say. Instead, they talk among themselves, interrupt you, start leafing through their papers, or simply leave.

An invisible person loses her lustre, her power of initiative and her drive. She may also suffer loss of professional identity and feel inferior, unimportant and insignificant.

- Demand clear-cut procedures at meetings, such as how long each person is allowed to speak, that no interruptions are allowed and that decisions may only be taken on topics that have been included on the agenda in advance.
- Turn the same weapon on the person who fired it at you – make him or her invisible.

2. Ridiculing people

Below the surface lurks contempt of a particular group, which is expressed in derogatory jokes or jargon, or in the use of 'labels' that ridicule or belittle the group, e.g. "hysterical females".

The person exposed to this treatment has either to laugh along with the others to show that she or he is 'one of the gang', or repay the 'joker' in kind. Those who are either unable or have no desire to join in such generalising mockery, or lack the energy to do so, easily become outcasts and are labelled 'over-sensitive' or 'lacking a sense of humour'.

- Make clear that you neither accept nor appreciate such jokes or jargon.
- Don't join in the laughter – whether it's aimed at you or at someone else. Take responsibility for yourself and thereby for others.
- Use humour, or irony: Give a big yawn, wait until an embarrassed silence develops and then ask a colleague (who does not use this technique): "What does he mean, do you suppose?"

3. Withholding information

Information is withheld from an individual or group of individuals at the workplace, or in a particular department or team. Deliberately or unintentionally. This might include decisions taken "by us lads down at the pub", in other words by a few select people. At the next meeting – when everyone is present – this item of business is rapidly dispatched. Despite the fact that some people have not had a chance to discuss whatever it was the inner circle decided.

There is a considerable risk that a person from whom information is withheld will take the wrong decisions, which in time may damage her or his career prospects. If the aim is to demonstrate to those higher up that the person is incompetent, this is a sophisticated technique.

- Demand that all those with decision-making powers have the same basic data at their disposal when decisions are to be made.
- Demand that decisions on important issues requiring more time for consideration be put off until later.
- Try to get hold of the necessary information by other means, through your own contact network.
- As a last resort, start your own "down-at-the-pub" group, to which the 'inner circle' is not invited. Remember, though, that splitting up in different groups probably will have damaging effects to the overall decision making process



4. Setting the terms

The dominant group often feels it has the right to define reality, i.e. to decide which matters may be considered irrelevant or which decisions may be considered irrational.

As a result, dialogue is sometimes eclipsed before it has even begun. People are reduced to silence and are seldom or never given an opportunity to show their skills, which reduces their career prospects.

- Demand to be given the floor – and to be allowed to finish what you have to say.
- If no-one listens, write a report. Demand that the report be read by all and discussed at the next meeting.
- Ask what the management team's long-term goals are regarding internal communication. Refer to such concepts as openness, tolerance and diversity. Take courage and put your message across, based on the right of all to communicate. Do so in a friendly but firm manner.

5. Stereotyping

Stereotyping means locking us into predetermined positions or roles. At the structural level, it can take such forms as claiming that women are better suited for jobs that involve administration or caring for people.

At the individual level, it is often a case of women being allotted specific roles, such as that of 'mum' sorting everything out for 'the lads'. This method is often practised where women are in minority situations in male-dominated environments.

- Does anyone call you 'sweetie' or 'good girl'? Call him 'pet' or 'good boy' and pinch his cheek.
- Are the men being given precedence at promotion time? Demand a talk with your immediate superior and clearly state your aims and objectives. Ask for an action plan that presents you with fresh challenges. Schedule a follow-up discussion.

6. 'Double punishment'

This technique is slightly less obvious than the others. It is more a case of a culturally driven phenomenon that is fairly widespread in modern society. A typical example is the difficulty of reconciling different roles at home and at work. Women are accused by those around them – more or less explicitly – of being inadequate mothers if they pursue careers. At the same time, they are thought to lack the necessary commitment at work if they give precedence to their home and family. If they choose both, dissatisfaction may well grow in both quarters. Women may succumb to all the pressure and abandon their careers.

Double punishment can sometimes be difficult to deal with, but here are some hints:

- Be very careful when choosing your partner for life...
- ...and be even more careful when choosing who you work for. Insist on the right to say no – or yes – to the boss without this leading to punishment of some kind, such as being bypassed for promotion.
- Estimate how much time you spend on housework and then come to an agreement with your partner, so that you share it equally.



7. Blaming and shaming

Those who seek to blame others and make them feel guilty or ashamed probably want to avoid taking responsibility themselves. The guilt technique is often used against people who make awkward demands or raise matters that others would prefer to keep under wraps.

The victim is told that she or he doesn't know enough about the matter or isn't competent enough, or has no reason to complain (e.g. about a lack of resources or the need to change something). There is a danger that victims may then begin to view themselves as querulous, as someone who is on the wrong track.

Serious cases of shaming or of instilling guilt in others can be equated with bullying.

- Enlist the support of someone you trust who can analyse the situation. Only accept responsibility for things you yourself are responsible for. Dismiss your feelings of guilt.
- Confront whoever tried to make you feel guilty or ashamed and explain how you view the matter. You may be able to reach a solution together.
- Do none of the above work? Seek help from someone higher up, or from an external consultant.

8. Sexual harassment

At the structural level, this means denigrating and abusing women by means of advertising and sexual exploitation in the media. At the individual level, it may be a case of improper and unwelcome sexual approaches, whether verbal or physical or both.

- Anyone who feels they have been subjected to sexual harassment should make clear to the person concerned that such behaviour is unwelcome and discomfiting. This can be done in writing, orally or with the help of someone else you trust.
- If the harassment continues or becomes even more abusive – either verbally or physically – demand intervention on the part of your boss. Is it the boss who is responsible for the harassment? Go higher up in the organisation, or contact your union or the occupational health service.

9. Benevolent resistance

This technique is used to resist demands for equal opportunity in an age of publicly sanctioned gender equality policies. There is general approval of the idea of equality, but nothing is done to fulfil the requirements. 'Invisible' opposition prevents change – plenty of words but no deeds.

- Draw up a gender equality plan with interim targets and follow-up dates.
- Draw up action plans for bringing more women into senior positions. Use Women-to-the-Top methods and tools.
- Analyse the organisation's culture and find out what the staff are happy/unhappy about. Assemble these views in the form of a package of measures and share out the work so that everyone becomes involved. That way, there is a greater chance that something really useful will happen – that the workplace will move from words to deeds!