

Commentary: For the love of Mike. IT'S JUST LUNCH!



So Vice President Mike Pence has a policy of not dining alone with a woman who is not his wife, and of not attending events that serve alcohol without her. (ANDREW HARRER / POOL / EPA)

By **Joanne Cleaver**

MARCH 31, 2017, 1:40 PM

So Vice President Mike Pence has a policy of not dining alone with a woman who is not his wife, and of not attending events that serve alcohol without her.

The fact that this policy is kicking up controversy proves the point: Men in power are in an impossible situation. They are supposed to be committed, in word and deed, to promoting women, which involves getting to know those worth promoting. Of course, we might not even be debating this hornet's nest if current and prior presidents had lived by the same rules.

It wasn't very long ago that commentators noted with amusement that Pence was almost a parody of Midwest wholesomeness, the yang to President Donald Trump's yin. Trump could not keep his hands off women. Pence keeps both hands in the air so you can see them at all times.

And they're both wrong?

This kerfuffle calls out the hypocritical flip side of workplace diversity efforts. In large part, white men are in power, so it's up to them to change the game so that it is fully open to people not like them. Bosses don't have to worry about gender dynamics when mentoring and sponsoring racially diverse men.

It's nothing but worry when rising women are in line for intensive career development.

Here's what human resources directors won't tell you: that behind the lofty mission statements, many male executives are terrified of being accused of being either Donald Trump or Mike Pence. If there were a fine line between the two, they'd walk it.

But there isn't. The national discussion about gender and power is so instantly polarizing that there is no middle way. The evangelist Billy Graham figured that out decades ago. He decided that if you have to pick a lane, choose the most conservative one. Pence is one of many who follow Graham's lead. And so, women are subtly excluded from career-making meetings, projects and opportunities — because someone might draw the erroneous conclusion that the agenda is about sex, not money.

That's not overkill, that's common sense, and the ridiculous commentary about his rules regarding women prove his point.

All the programs in the world can't negate this dynamic — not when a simple discussion is enough to touch off rumors. "Open door" policies aren't enough. Travel, social events and late nights on deadline all happen outside the traditional office setting. Those are the same events where ambitious women need to show what they're made of — participating in acquisition negotiations, preparing for board presentations, analyzing market opportunities. This is precisely what hands-on leadership development looks like. This is where change happens and where women deserve chances to earn top spots.

The solution lies with all of us. We can be better than these gleeful takedowns. We can refrain from drawing hasty conclusions that sex is on the menu when men and women colleagues have dinner so they can work together. We can call out others who are quick to charge sexism — especially when they also demand that employers change the status quo.

Well, we're the status quo. We're the ones who make a simple working lunch into a deposition. We're the ones who need to ask, not assume. Let's make it safe to lunch again.

Joanne Cleaver is a communication consultant based in Chicago.

