

Accommodation

Accommodation

“Sharilyn, let’s review our earlier discussion and focus on clear communication. You admitted to the alleged offensive behavior. Is that correct?” My HR manager tapped her notebook with her pen and slid the compact recorder closer to the middle of the conference-room table.

“Yes, Ms. Creighton.” I folded my hands in my lap to keep them from shaking. My mouth was dry. I lifted my chin but lowered my eyes, striving to convey that I was accountable and apologetic.

Ms. Creighton stared at me with her beady, black eyes. Her paprika-colored hair was slicked back from her long, narrow face and molded on her head like a helmet. When I was hired as administrative assistant to the director sixteen and a half months (so almost two years) ago, I pictured her as a crayfish to help me remember her name.

“OK,” she continued in her even-toned voice. “When I asked you why, you stated that you ‘had to do it.’ Is that correct?”

The air in the room was thick with her expensive-smelling perfume. I had often thought, when I got a decent raise, I would wear perfume like that, the essence of affluence. “Yes, Ms. Crayfi—Ms. Creighton.”

Her copper-lacquered nails tapped the table and reminded me of the appendages you pull off the abdomens of crustaceans when you dine at a southern seafood place. I didn’t catch my urge to smile at the thought quickly enough.

“Sharilyn, I can’t emphasize more emphatically that you need to take this seriously. You are facing disciplinary action up to and including termination.”

Accommodation

“Termination? But all I did was—”

“Our three *R*'s, Sharilyn? Remember: Respect and Responsibility. One of your coworkers has stated that you have subjected her to a hostile work environment with threatening language.”

“What? Who?”

“You understand we must preserve confidentiality. And you are not to discuss this matter with your fellow employees. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Ms. Creighton, but if I've been wrongfully accused of—”

“Sharilyn, this is your opportunity to provide any additional information or mitigating circumstances. Can you explain a little more about what you meant when you said, ‘I had to do it’?”

“Certainly.” I smoothed a loose tendril of hair back from my stress-dampened forehead and cleared my throat. “Well, it started about six months ago, at the end of September, when I went into the break room to wash my salad bowl.”

I walked her through every detail so that she would see my action was perfectly understandable.

I recalled that it was a Friday. I was holding my salad bowl under the running sink faucet and swabbing it with a soapy sponge, above the three dirty forks, two food-encrusted plates, and water-logged bits of meat and rice in the drain trap. My coworkers had apparently been too busy to take three minutes to clean up.

A little sign that hadn't been there the day before was pasted on the wall above the faucet. The eight-by-ten paper with text printed from an office printer and with a smiling yellow emoji at the bottom read:

Accommodation

Please clean up after yourselves!

I stared at the water rising in the sink and pushed the dirty dishes aside to uncover the drain and let the water run down.

A couple of weeks later, when I went into the break room to get some hot water for my tea, I noticed the little sign's corners had started to curl and the emoji face was distorted where water had splattered and dried. But not water from dishwashing as the sink was still cluttered. Next to the first sign was a second one, on purple paper with a slightly less cheerful emoji, entreating my fellow employees:

Please wash your dishes!

I shrugged off this new reminder, obviously not applicable to me, dipped my tea bag into my mug, and went back to my desk.

Just before Halloween, the head payroll specialist retired, and her sendoff in the conference room was celebrated with a triple-fudge cake. Before I went home for the day, I stopped in the break room to retrieve the cake knife I had contributed to the party and which I had earlier washed and set aside. In the sink were four plates smeared with dried cake frosting. Someone had re-taped the two signs that were slipping from the wall behind the sink and a new sign had been added above the two previous ones.

This sign was on blue paper and had been laminated to fend off splattered water and featured a frowning emoji as it more specifically encouraged:

Please wash your dishes after using!

Was that the problem? Had people been washing their dishes before using? I shook my head and packed away the knife in my bag.

Accommodation

Through the next couple of months, the signs became a bit more worn, but they kept their vigil over the sink that was filled constantly with unwashed plates, mugs, and utensils. Occasionally, a dumped bowl of ramen noodles was left by someone who thought the mess would magically disappear down the drain instead of clogging it.

A placard bordered with images of cute teacups graced a cabinet door to the side of the sink and reminded:

This is everybody's break room.

Please, EVERYBODY, let's keep it clean and neat!

I racked my brain to recall when *everybody's* break room had been clean and neat, so that only maintenance was now required and if we ever had had cute teacups.

Next to the empty cardboard tube in the paper towel holder was tacked an admonishment on a peach-colored card:

Please replace the paper towel roll!

With a sigh, I pulled a new roll of paper towels from the cabinet and paused to wipe up a puddle of water on the counter. Above the counter, a lavender sticky note requested some unknown persons to:

Please wipe up your spills!

A white paper rectangle covered the glass front of the microwave, exhorting some forgetful people to:

Please cover your food!

Accommodation

I pulled open the microwave door and set my covered soup on the circular tray where a glob of barbecue sauce and a puddle of melted cheese had been permanently fused.

As I waited for my food to warm, I scanned the long, wood-grain table and the missive taped in the center, noticeably free of emojis and other frills, pleading in hot-pink cursive:

Please clean up your crumbs!

Bits of cookies, treats brought in by a coworker that morning, were strewn like confetti across the table and onto one chair.

Behind the table, posted on the freezer door of the fridge, white letters on a black background begged:

Please refill the ice trays!

I didn't have to pull the freezer door open to know that at least two of the four trays were sitting in there filled with nothing but frozen air.

For a few weeks, I started limiting my visits to the break room. The weather was getting warmer, and it was a treat to walk to somewhere nearby to buy a cup of coffee or lunch. But that was costly, and I was still waiting for that fourth *R*: Raise.

I had to go back to leftovers and the break room. It was becoming more difficult every day to find a corner of the fridge to stow my lunch. Gallon jugs of juice and soy milk and cartons of eggs crowded the shelves. Behind them, plastic containers with bowed lids covered green, furry stuff. Half a dozen partially used salad dressings and stacks of string cheese were shoved into the space in the door.

Accommodation

After I squeezed my small, thermal lunch sack inside, I slammed the fridge door and came face to face with:

Please remember to take all your unused food home at the end of the week!

“So, you see, Ms. Creighton, last Wednesday, when I went into the break room to warm up my vegetable lasagna, this is what I was thinking: What was needed was clear communication, and it was my RESPONSIBILITY to help everyone REMEMBER RESPECT. I had to do it. I went to the supply room and got a poster board and some duct tape and a thick-tipped, black magic marker and I put my own sign on the break room door:

“HEY, BITCHES!

FUCK THESE SIGNS!

TAKE CARE OF YOUR SHIT!!!!”

“Hmm,” Ms. Creighton said. Her doubt that my explanation constituted mitigating circumstances was written all over her face.

She was talking about bridging and culture, and I couldn’t make the words connect in my brain. Her voice was a flat buzz in my ears. Could I really be fired? My chest tightened. I took a gulp of air, and it stuck like a wad of dry cotton in my throat.

“Sharilyn. Are you OK?” Ms. Creighton leaned toward me. “Do you need to take a short break?”

“I . . . I think it’s your perfume. I’m having difficulty breathing.”

Ms. Creighton put her hand to her heart. “I had no idea you had scent hypersensitivity.”

Accommodation

“Hyperwha—” I gasped again, for effect this time. I dabbed at my eyes with the tips of my fingers. “I think my eyes are swelling.” I fanned my face with my hand. “It’s really warm in here, isn’t it?”

Ms. Creighton pushed back her chair, rushed to the window, and pushed it open, all the while glancing back at me, her elongated jaw hanging in alarm.

“Do you need an accommodation, a modified workplace?”

I stared at her, too puzzled to speak. What was she talking about?

“Air filters? A separate office? Or we could arrange for you to work from home.”

I blinked rapidly and took another sharp intake of air. I visualized myself sitting in front of my laptop at my crumbless kitchen table with a cheery vase of sunflowers in the middle, my morning tea within reach, steaming in a cup that I would later rinse out in my well-scrubbed sink. Was this really happening?

“But, Ms. Creighton, what about my alleged offensive behavior?” I made a little choking sound and shielded a cough with my hand. “What about hostile work environment and mitigating circumstances?”

“We’ll have to reschedule our discussion when you are able to do so.” She gathered her notes and recorder. Her brow sagged with a mask of sympathy, or was it empathy? “I’ll bring you the reasonable accommodation request form right away.”

A calm washed over me as the door closed behind her. My throat relaxed. I inhaled a deep, cleansing breath and exhaled slowly. I stood up and stretched. Laughter came through the open window from the parking lot. The sound welled up in me, and I joined in with my own trill of delight.

Accommodation

While working from home, I could update my resume, contact prospective employers, pop out for interviews. Who would know? The great job and paycheck I deserved were waiting for me. I pumped my fist with a tempered shout, "Yes!"