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## "Hey, that's rankist!"

### A new battle cry for the rank and file?

Katharine Mieszkowski

Aug. 11, 2006 | Robert Fuller, the former president of Oberlin College, wants wage slaves everywhere to learn this word, and teach it to their bosses: "rankism." In a piece in the Boston Globe this week, career columnist Penelope Trunk takes up the charge, declaring that, like racism and sexism, "rankism is another kind of discrimination that we should not tolerate. What's rankism, or rankist behavior? It is hiring an intern and ignoring her all summer. Or pointlessly yelling at the receptionist about a manager who is late. Or a professor's taking credit for a graduate student's research. All these are examples of people who think they can treat someone disrespectfully because of their lower rank." (For Hollywood's recent treatment, see "The Devil Wears Prada.")

Fuller, who apparently has a fondness for neologisms, describes himself as a "dignitarian." That's someone who believes that everyone deserves dignity. The author of a 2003 book called "Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank" offers this argument for why the word "rankist" is needed: "Vocabulary changes things," Fuller tells Trunk. "'The Feminine Mystique' referred to the 'problem without a name.' Sexism was not a word until five years after that book came out. Once the word sexism was available, women had a weapon to make demands." One common justification by higher-ups for rankist hazing: "I got through this, so you can too."

Columnist Trunk encourages the downtrodden and disrespected to not be afraid to tell a boss, "Hey, that's rankist!" just like calling a pig on being sexist. And she admits that demanding change in the workplace may require being willing to risk getting fired: "But young people today -- who invariably fill entry-level positions -- switch jobs often. So the risk of offending a boss for speaking out against rankism does not seem that big a deal." It's kind of refreshing to hear someone say that being fired might be worth it, if your work situation is really miserable enough.

While I'm all for anything that offers the hope for more respect in the workplace, I have my doubts that "rankism" will take off as a term. For one, entry-level workers often become mid-level workers, and so many all too quickly forget the indignities of being on the lowest rung on the ladder. Also, the casual contempt that a high-flying executive might display at the office toward a career secretary seems aptly described by good old-fashioned classism. Yet "rankism," however awkward, describes an instantly recognizable phenomenon, whether or not you buy that it should be rooted out as a form of discrimination, like racism or sexism.

So, just to give it a fair shake: Are you rankist? Are you so rankist you don't even know you're a rankist? Is your boss a rankist pig? Did you not suffer everything it took to become the boss just so you could be sassed by entry-level whippersnappers about your rank rankism?

Discuss!

-- Katharine Mieszkowski

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