

Maureen (Mo) McKenna

Pink Steel-Toed Shoes

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My roommate, Anne, shakes her head as I model my new business uniform: pink socks with brown elephants, pink safety shoes, brown pants, a cream t-shirt and a hot-pink jacket. No more business suits with silk blouses, colour-coordinated scarves, earrings, designer purses and matching high heels.

“Hey, when you’re the first woman manager in a manufacturing plant, you get to set the trend,” I reply, and I take one final look at myself in the hall mirror to boost my morale. How did Dennis, vice president of manufacturing, sell me on this assignment? I loved my marketing job at the Pink Palace as we affectionately called head office. There are five thousand jobs in our company in Canada alone, how did I end up agreeing to do this one? I seem to recall it was his offer to pay for my skydiving lessons that closed the deal.

I shrug as I walk towards the door. How difficult can it be to go from managing six MBA graduates to thirty-four union workers?

When I park my silver 1983 Volkswagen Diesel Rabbit in the parking lot, I hear a jet and look up to see the wheels coming down as it approaches landing.

At least I am close to the airport for a quick getaway.

As I approach a bright yellow door with the sign Staff Only, a young woman pushes by. “Shit, I’ve got to clock-in right now or I’ll be late. If I’m late again, I’ll be suspended without pay ... shit, shit ...” she mutters as she runs in the door.

My new boss greets me.

“Welcome, Mo. Glad you could make it. Let me walk you over to your new office.”

“Hi, Peter. I feel quite special having the plant manager meet me at the door on my first day.”

“What the hell do you have on your feet?”

“You told me it was mandatory to wear safety shoes. I thought a little colour would cheer up the place. Ain’t it swell to have a woman on your team?”

Peter shakes his head. We walk behind yellow lines painted on a grey concrete floor in a room the size of three football fields. People nudge each other; I feel my cheeks turn pink. “Go back to work!” shouts Peter to a group who stands and points at me. I look over and give a faint-hearted smile. Be brave, a voice from inside shouts. You can do this.

“Glad to have you on board,” Peter says. “We are hoping that with your background in quality and your reputation for having good management practices, you’ll get the low volume copier line back on track. Dennis promised me that if I took you on, you’d have us back on track within sixty days. I took a big risk taking on a woman manager. Here’s your new home.” Peter abruptly stops in front of the paint area. A sea of grey copier panels hang on several large chrome racks. My office sits right behind the racks.

Gosh, how kind, to give me an office where I can literally watch paint dry. This is not a good sign. I know the other managers don’t want a woman in their ranks, but to pick this place for my office! Okay, it is only a portable office, maybe I can get someone to move it, I tell myself.

“Fred, come meet your replacement, Mo McKenna. Mo’s from Glasgow, too.”

A very large red-headed, bearded man walks towards us. He stands six-feet-four, probably weighs 250 pounds. I stand four-feet-eleven and weigh in at slightly over the one hundred mark.

“Frae Glasgow, eh? So are you a Catholic bitch, eh? I mean are you a Celtic supporter, or do you support Rangers?” Fred bellows, wanting to know my religious affiliation. He fakes a laugh for Peter’s sake.

Peter chuckles.

I swallow hard; I can’t believe Peter is treating this as a joke. Has he never heard of the war in Northern Ireland?

I ignore the comment.

“Maureen, let me show you how to handle this place.” Fred walks out of the office. “You just need to intimidate the line into working their arses off, or else they’ll take advantage of you. I’m only here until the end of the week for you to learn all my tricks.”

I am silent. Fred should have been fired. Someone must have owed him a big favour to get him a transfer to another part of the company.

I glance around my office: grey walls, cheap grey carpet, a ceiling with glaring florescent lights behind cracked plastic panels, a grey metal desk and an ugly black chair. The window, overlooking the paint racks, needs cleaning. Grey blinds!

Mike, who was hired to do my marketing job in head office, will be enjoying my beautiful former office. It has a huge window framing fabulous sunsets, bright prints of Monet’s “Garden at Giverny” hanging on the walls, lovely light wood furniture, funky blue, black and turquoise carpeting and halogen lamps on the tables.

“Hey, nae time tae daydream here. Let’s go.” Fred marches me out to the middle of the factory to the low volume copier production line. At each of the twenty stations there is a partly finished copier.

A slim, middle-aged man approaches me, smiles and extends his hand. “Welcome to Courtney Park. My name is Al and I’m the chief shop steward.” His soft Irish accent warms my heart. I grasp his firm handshake and match it with my own brand of firmness.

“Thank you, Al. I’m looking forward to being here and learning the ropes.”

“Al, take Mo down the line and introduce her to the team,” Fred commands. “I’m off for a smoke.”

We meander down the production line and Al introduces me to the team. “Mo, this is Lee. He is from Vietnam. You might have seen his face on the front of *The Globe & Mail*. He was one of the first ‘boat people’ to arrive in Canada.” Lee bows gently and respectfully. I lower my head and shake his hand.

“Tony, what part of Italy are you from?” Al calls out to a man at the next workstation.

“Brindisi, in the heel of the country,” Tony shouts over the sound of drilling.

“I spent four days in Brindisi back in 1975. The day I arrived by ferry from Greece, there was a national rail strike and I had to sleep at a cheap *pensione* (hotel) for three nights.” I smile and walk to the next station.

“Terri is from Ghana. How long have you been in Canada?” Al grins as he asks the question. Terri’s smile is infectious and I grin too.

“Got here in 1976 and was hired the same year. I brought my sister, brother and mother over to Canada in the last four years. This organization has been good to me.” I shake hands and move on.

I have thirty-four people working on the line and only four were born in Canada.

“Al, this is just like the United Nations. I hadn’t realized how diverse the workforce is out here.”

“Sign of what the city will become over the next twenty years. By the time 2005 comes along we won’t recognize the place,” replies Al. “English is a second and sometimes fourth language for many here. It can be a challenge when training them. They are a well-educated group but their credentials are not recognized. They’re glad to find work with good salary and benefits.”

Al looks down the line and sights a bottleneck in the work flow. Three machines sit at one workstation. Al sighs as we walk towards the empty station. Just as we reach the station a muscular young man appears. He bends his head as he walks through the six-foot-two-inch doorframe.

“Bill, where have you been?” asks Al. Bill ignores him, picks up a screwdriver and pulls one of the copiers off the production line into his station. Al quickly introduces me and we move on to the next workstation.

Forty minutes later, I go back to my office and sink into my dusty black chair. Closing my eyes, I imagine walking down the line and I try to remember all their names.

The PA system interrupts my thoughts. “Urgent! Mo McKenna go to Station Two on the low volume line. Urgent! Mo McKenna go to Station Two on the low volume line.”

I bolt from my chair and leave the sanctuary of my office. What the heck is happening that they need me? I frown as I march to Station Two.

I hear the argument long before I see the two men. Twelve people are standing in a circle. I can't see anything but I can hear the anger in Bill's voice and some hesitation in the voice of Lee.

“You screwed me, you bastard. You didn't put that part in right and now I have to spend my fucking coffee break fixing it. Go to hell.” Bill grabs Lee's shirt.

“Don't swear at me. You broke the part. Take your hand off my shirt,” Lee responds.

Bill towers over Lee, who stands not much taller than me, shouting, “Lee, you asshole. There's no way I'm taking the blame for this shabby work. I'm on probation again. There's no way you're getting me fired.”

I pull my shoulders back, take a deep breath and walk onto the battleground. All 240 people stop to watch me.

“What's going on?” I demand.

I stop four feet away from both employees.

Bill walks towards me. He is wearing large brown boots, blue jeans with a large silver buckle and a blue plaid shirt. I look up to his face. He takes another couple of steps and stops twelve inches away from me. My face reddens as I meet his eyes. I hold my ground. He continues to advance. I can feel his breath on the top of my head. I don't move.

Silence. A few moments ago the noise was deafening with drills buzzing and the creaking sounds of the copiers moving along conveyor belts. I realize that all the machines have been turned off as everyone stops to watch this confrontation.

I am going to win. There is no way I will let this bastard beat me on my first day. I wait...ten seconds...fifteen seconds....

Bill backs off. I can see his belt buckle again, silver with a sketch of a cowboy on a stallion. The buckle moves further away from me. Brown boots and concrete appear. Sweat runs down my arms, along my body and into my shoes.

"I'm giving you both five minutes to compose yourself and expect to see you in my office to discuss this. Okay?"

"Okay," says Lee.

Bill mutters under his breath.

"Bill, did you hear me? Be in my office in five minutes." I turn and walk away.

Someone on the line begins to clap; another person claps and more people clap until the clapping ripples down the lines.

"Way to go, showing that prick that you're not afraid of him," someone shouts.

I pretend I don't hear them. My eyes focus on my destination. Only three more minutes and I can escape and collapse in the privacy of my office. I brush past the paint racks and enter my office. I close the door. My legs shake. I sit down on my black chair, lift my pink steel-toed shoes onto the desk and think, Thank God for a blue collar upbringing in a tough area of Glasgow.

I laugh out loud as I think about Bill. In the words of my old pal from Glasgow, Jimmy Carson, “*Bill, you’re nothing more than machine gun talk from a water pistol.*”

Mo McKenna was born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1953, the youngest of two daughters. She immigrated to Canada in 1972, has lived in Ottawa and Halifax, and now resides in Toronto. She began her career at Xerox Canada in 1976. Twenty-two years later, she started her consulting business Mentoring with MOmentum Ltd. Her natural curiosity propels her into adventure, be it exploring townships in Soweto, South Africa, or building houses for Habitat for Humanity. In January 2010, her nephew Mike challenged her to face her fear of writing. Now she writes.