

A PROMOTION

On the face of it, Darnell, Inc. has a strong commitment to affirmative action. Five years ago less than 1% of its professional and managerial staff were women. Now 8% are women. However, few of the women are in senior positions. Partly this is because most of the women have less seniority than the vast majority of men. But it is also because, until recently, there has been widespread skepticism at Darnell that women are well suited for the responsibilities that attach to the more senior positions. This may now be changing. Catherine Morris is one of the leading candidates for promotion to Chief Engineer in Quality Control at Darnell.

Although they work in different areas of Darnell, Judy Hanson and Catherine Morris have gotten to know one another rather well in the few months Judy has been with Darnell. Judy likes Catherine very much, but she has serious doubts that Catherine is the right person for the promotion. She does not think that Catherine has strong leadership qualities or the kinds of organizational skills that will be needed. Furthermore, she is worried that if Catherine fails at the job, this will only reinforce the prevailing skepticism at Darnell about women's ability to handle senior position responsibilities. Rather than being a mark of women's progress at Darnell, it will be, Judy fears, a setback--one which will take its toll on other women at Darnell.

- a) What, if anything, should Judy do?
- b) Suppose Judy overhears several male engineers talking about Catherine's possible promotion. They remark that she will never be able to handle the job--and that this will show once and for all how foolish, and potentially harmful, affirmative action in the workplace is. What should she do?
- c) Suppose, it is Tom Evans, not Judy, who overhears the conversation in b)? What should he do?
- d) Suppose Tom and Judy overhear the conversation together.

COMMENTARIES

Henry West

Judy Hanson and Catherine Morris work in different areas at Darnell; so it may be that Judy doesn't recognize Catherine's leadership qualities and organizational skills as well as those who are considering her for the promotion. As a social friend, Judy may have seen a different side of Catherine's personality and, as a result, not seen the side that displays the qualifications for a Chief Engineer. Sometimes one doesn't recognize qualities in a good friend that one would see in people that one didn't know as well. "Familiarity breeds contempt" goes the proverb. When someone that you know well does something extraordinary, it can come as a surprise.

It is also possible that Judy shares the same prejudice against women in leadership positions that many men in the company apparently have and that pervade the general culture. Unconsciously, she may also be jealous of Catherine for being the first woman to be promoted to that high a level in the company. Judy should certainly do some soul-searching before she does anything except provide support, encouragement, and congratulations.

How would Judy feel if she were the one who was being considered for promotion, and Catherine had serious doubts about Judy's being the one for the job? Would she like it if Catherine expressed those feelings to others in the company, thus working against her promotion? Would she like it if Catherine even expressed those doubts to Judy, which would not increase her self-confidence at a critical time. With friends like that, who would need enemies?

If Judy's friend Tom were being considered for the position, would Judy even think of doing anything in regard to his promotion in a different area of the company, even if she felt that he didn't have the strong leadership qualities or the organizational skills needed. She would have hoped him the best. So she will hope Catherine the best.

After all, what is going to happen if Catherine doesn't do well in the job? Will it really take its toll on other women at Darnell, or will it have broken the ice for women's promotions with the result that women be considered for other promotions. Once there is a woman in a senior position, the company may feel that it has to promote another to compensate, in case Catherine is demoted. And Catherine may rise to the occasion and do well. Judy should certainly do nothing to prevent her from having the chance.

Suppose, however, that Judy believes that Catherine's promotion is a deliberate effort to discredit Affirmative Action. She believes that management is deliberately putting a woman in a position over her head in order to counteract the pressure from the women in the company that some of them be promoted to senior positions. Management wants Catherine to fail in order to quiet the women's criticism. What then? Should Judy try to organize a women's caucus to come up with a unified reaction to the promotion?

Suppose, further, that the women in Quality Control, which is Catherine's department, do not think that Catherine is qualified and they think that another woman in the department is the person for the job? They come to Judy and ask her to help them persuade Catherine to turn down the promotion in favor of the other woman. Should Judy agree?

If Judy overhears male engineers remarking that Catherine will never be able to handle the job and that this will show how foolish, and potentially harmful, affirmative action is, the easiest thing to do would be to pretend that she hasn't heard. But the men are engaged in politically significant conversation, and, if Judy believes in Affirmative Action, she would be negligent if there is anything she can say which would help to rebut the conclusion to which the men are coming. Even if she doesn't believe that Catherine's promotion is wise, and even if she does believe that it will be taken as evidence that women don't make good leaders, she might be able to think of something appropriate to say to the men to defend Affirmative Action.

Whether to say something to the men might depend upon the atmosphere in the company. If Affirmative Action is official policy, genuinely supported by upper management, or it is at least generally given lip service, and the men would be embarrassed by having been overheard in such a conversation, she might make a point of letting them know that she had heard. If, on the other hand, women were admitted into positions very grudgingly and with a lot of hostility, she might simply be making life difficult for herself without helping any.

Whether to say anything might also depend upon Judy's personality. If she is the sort of person who can make a

sarcastic remark, which will make people think twice but not really angry, she might say, "Every male who's been promoted has been able to handle the job; so all we have to do is promote a male--is that right?"

Tom Evans, overhearing the conversation, might be able to join it in a serious way more easily than Judy. The fact that he overheard it would probably not put the men on the defensive. He could point out that whether she could handle it or not remained to be seen. It's a difficult job and lots of men in the department or company are not as good candidates as she. Give her a chance or find someone better qualified, but judge her by her abilities, not by her gender.

If they overhear the conversation together, they might each make the kind of remarks indicated.

The above are assuming that Judy and Tom both favor Affirmative Action. Judy and Tom may not agree or may not know that they agree. These situations have to be played out in the specific context. Here, as often in ethics, there may be no general rules that apply. Judy and Tom may simply have to do what seems most appropriate, given a sensitivity to the effects of what they might do or say.

Lea P. Stewart

The "glass ceiling" is a common phenomenon in organizations today. In many organizations, there are significant numbers of women at the lower managerial levels, but few women at the more senior managerial levels. There are even fewer women at the most senior managerial levels and on boards of directors. Darnell, Inc. may have a strong commitment to affirmative action, but the glass ceiling is firmly in place. There are some signs that this situation may be changing, however.

Catherine Morris is in line for a promotion at Darnell. Her coworker, Judy Hanson, does not believe she can handle the promotion. Judy fears that Catherine's failure might set back the cause of promotion for women. In other words, if the first woman manager fails, then women will never be promoted again. Judy is making several assumptions in this case. Let's examine them one at a time.

First, Judy has assumed that Catherine is incompetent as a manager. We do not know what evidence she has for this decision. She knows Catherine "rather well," but she works in a different area of the company. It is her opinion that Catherine does not have "strong leadership qualities or the kinds of organizational skills that will be needed." Somehow, though, Catherine has become a leading candidate for promotion. Perhaps someone else in the company has recognized qualities in Catherine that Judy does not see. Perhaps someone in authority has decided that Catherine has the ability to become an effective leader if given the chance. Judy's opinion may not be the best one to consider in this situation. Nevertheless, Judy may be right. Catherine may not be a very good leader.

The second assumption Judy is making in this case is that if Catherine fails no other woman will ever get promoted. This is a common perception of organizational tokens (people who are in the minority in their jobs--like female engineers or male nurses). The organizational token is taken to stand for everyone who is like them. People assume that the token's behavior is an indication of how all people who are like the token behave. This is an unfair judgment. Catherine is Catherine. She is not all women. If she fails, she fails as herself, not as a representative of all women who ever worked for Darnell. Judy should not promote this view. She should be working to get others to see Catherine for herself, not as a symbol of all women who aspire to higher management positions at Darnell. She has an excellent opportunity to express this view when she overhears the engineers express doubts about Catherine. Without downgrading Catherine, she could make it clear that

Catherine's success or failure is her own and not a reflection of the competencies of all women at Darnell.

The final assumption that Judy makes is that Catherine will not have any support in her new position. Catherine is seen as the woman who has to make it on her own. Perhaps she will find a mentor to help her through difficult times. Perhaps other workers will help her develop her leadership abilities. Perhaps there are training seminars that she will be able to attend to develop any management skills she may lack. If Darnell is truly committed to affirmative action, they must help employees develop the skills they need to succeed in their new positions.

Although this case may appear to be about the ethical responsibility of one employee to support another employee, it is really about an organization's ethical responsibility to support the employees it chooses to promote. Darnell will not have an ethical affirmative action policy if it merely promotes women or any other group of people without providing the support they need to do their new jobs effectively.

John B. Dilworth

Though this has the potential to be a significant case, in its specific questions it is a very straightforward. It is presented in the general context of the issue of affirmative action, yet the specific questions asked hardly admit of morally interesting answers. What should Judy Hanson do if she hears of an impending promotion of someone, whether male or female, friend or stranger, in another division of Darnell? The obvious answer is -- nothing. If Judy has no administrative responsibility for the decision, and also lacks full knowledge of all the factors that went into the decision, she has no business interfering with it in any way. Even as a personal friend of candidate Catherine Morris, she should do no more than wish her well in her new position. For it would be insulting and morally demeaning to Catherine for Judy to try to use her case as a means to some affirmative action end at Darnell.

As to Judy or Tom 'overhearing' talk about Catherine's promotion, here too she/they should do nothing. Unless what they overhear is so illegal or immoral that even hearing it imposes obligations to interfere or reveal the matter to others, they should respect the privacy of those whose conversations they overhear. Office gossips and busybodies are likely to cause much more moral damage in the workplace than would the kinds of personal expressions of prejudice against affirmative action likely to be overheard.

If, on the other hand, Judy or Tom are themselves taking part in the conversation (so that they 'hear' rather than 'overhear'), then of course they should feel free to honestly express their own views on the topic, whatever those views are.

Now let us read between the lines of this case and draw out an implied, substantive issue for those who care about the advancement of women in society. In the battle for equality for women, is it morally required that everything be done to maximize the gains and minimize the losses for every aspect of the battle, including minor skirmishes? For example, must an individual such as Catharine be prevented from taking a job, if she might perform poorly and hence make women look bad in a particular case?

First, one should not do anything substantially illegal or immoral to advance women. The worthy goals of justice and equal rights for all does not permit achieving some at the expense of others. So behavior such as faking Catherine's performance records or other political manipulations at Darnell is unacceptable. Also, as already suggested, even an attempt by Judy to persuade Catherine to withdraw is morally suspect on several grounds. Judy would be in great danger of betraying her friend, and doing so in the process of using her as a pawn in a civil rights skirmish.

Second, we must never forget that affirmative action policies are only a means to the end of promoting equal rights for people. The moral goal of equality of opportunity for all is widely accepted, but policies of achieving this for women by preferential hiring or promotion are much more controversial. Even supporters of affirmative action policies would have to agree that preferential treatment of one group over another is morally questionable. (In their view it is a necessary evil in order to achieve changes which will make full equality possible some day.)

The practical effect of this second point is that morally the only firm ground available centers round issues of equality of opportunity. Any other issues are questionable or peripheral, and should be ignored in any conflict with the central issues. In the present case this means that since Catherine is undeniably being given an opportunity to succeed (through her promotion), then the central civil rights issue has been settled. Other issues, such as that she may fail and make women or affirmative action look bad, must be ignored because (if acted upon to prevent her promotion) they would conflict with her right to have that opportunity.

Another way to look at equal opportunity is as a right to succeed or fail. Those who would for whatever reasons deprive Catherine of her right to fail are no friends to civil rights for women.

C. E. Harris

If Judy's assessment of Catherine's prospects as Chief Engineer in Quality Control are correct, the long-range consequences of Catherine's not getting the job are probably better than the long-range consequences of Catherine's getting the job. If she fails and has to be removed, her promotion will not increase the number of women in senior management. In addition, her failure will reduce the chances of other women being promoted to senior positions in the future.

This still leaves open the question of what Judy should do. Presumably she is not directly involved in the promotion decision, and she may not even be asked for her opinion about the promotion. Thus she will have to go out of her way to make any effort to affect the decision process. What obligation does she have to do this?

Generally speaking, our obligation to prevent an unfortunate consequence (especially where it does not involve the loss of life) is weaker than our obligation not to directly participate in wrongdoing. Our obligation to do what we can to prevent environmental damage in the rain forests of Brazil is not as strong as our obligation not to engage directly in environmental pollution ourselves. On the other hand, we do have some obligation to try to prevent unfortunate consequences when we are in a position to do so, especially if there is relatively little cost to ourselves. In this case, the primary cost could be the damage to the friendship between Judy and Catherine. If suggestions to those in a position to make the decision about Catherine's promotion could be made discretely, this might be avoided. But Judy would still have to wrestle with the fact that she has undermined Catherine's chances for promotion without her knowledge. This knowledge would almost inevitably limit Judy's ability to relate to Catherine in an open and honest way, even if Catherine never knows the reason for the difference in Judy's relation to her.

Judy might decide to simply tell Catherine that she has suggested that Catherine is not the person for the promotion at this time. This would probably damage the relationship in the short run, but it might provide the basis of a stronger and more honest relationship in the future. This option would have the advantage of satisfying more moral demands: it would prevent potentially serious damage to the cause of gender equality at Darnell and it would preserve a healthy, honest friendship between Catherine and Judy.

An honest and informed commitment to the cause of gender equality might require that both Judy and Tom

express their partial agreement with the male engineers who believe that Catherine is not qualified for the promotion. They could say that, even though they support gender equality, they agree that Catherine is not the right person for the promotion. Catherine would probably eventually hear about this conversation. But if Judy and Tom told Catherine of their position, this would not be a problem.

Joseph Ellin

Darnell, Inc. claims to have a strong commitment to affirmative action, and now it appears that a woman, Catherine, is about to get a promotion. Judy has reservations about Catherine's ability to do the job. If Darnell really has the strong commitment to affirmative action it claims to have, Judy should have no problem expressing her reservations to an appropriate superior. A strong commitment means that women who can do the job are the ones who will get promoted, and not 'pretty faces' who will eventually fail. Therefore Judy's problem is how to go about making her reservations about Catherine effective.

She might consider these strategies. 1. Talk to Catherine herself and ask her to withdraw her candidacy for the reasons given. Perhaps she risks losing her friend. On the other hand, maybe Catherine has her own doubts about her ability to fill the position she's in line for. Judy's frank discussion might help her do the job better if she gets it; or maybe Catherine will be able to put Judy's fears at rest. 2. Talk to other women in the company, first to see if they also have reservations about Catherine's impending promotion; and second, if they do, to organize opposition and make it known to the appropriate superior. All the women at Darnell have a stake in this promotion, evidently. If the other women don't share Judy's fears, maybe she should drop it (she could be wrong about Catherine); if they're afraid to act on their fears, Judy might reconsider whether 'affirmative action' is worth fighting for.

Under situation (b), Judy hears male engineers deriding women. The remark she overhears from the male engineers could indicate that Darnell's commitment to AA is more verbal than real. Judy should try to determine this by discussing what may be prevalent male opinion, with higher management, and seeing what they say. If the promotion of Catherine turns out to be a set-up, designed to discredit the affirmative action program, then Judy will have a real problem on her hands.

It might be a good idea for Judy to talk to some other male engineer whom she trusts, maybe Tom Evans. Tom may very well know more about the attitudes of the male engineers, and of the company officials, than Judy does. If she trusts him, he might be a good person to talk this problem over with before she does anything. She may get a better perspective on the real attitudes of people at Darnell, and advice from an experienced person.

In (c), Tom Evans rather than Judy hears the male engineers talking. Should he do something? It depends. If someone such as Judy asks him if he knows anything helpful, perhaps he might. But obviously he isn't going to come running to Judy--"Guess what I heard"--unless he has reason to know that the Catherine promotion is bothering her. Should he do anything else? This depends on how he feels about affirmative action. He might make it his business to talk to the engineers at some point and try to correct their negative attitude; or if he feels strongly enough, he might talk to management about their (management's) problem. He takes a certain risk obviously but if he does this tactfully he might come out ahead.

In (d), there are no special problems since both hear the conversation together. If Judy trusts Tom she can rely on him for advice and support.