

SUNNYVALE

I

Jim Grimaldi, projects manager in the Sunnyvale division of Universal Corporation, has just learned that in two weeks the headquarters in Los Angeles will be sending him a project engineer, Joan Dreer. Her job will be to supervise small groups of engineers involved in automotive brake design. The Los Angeles headquarters is anxious to move women into all company levels, and it has targeted Grimaldi's engineering division at Sunnyvale as a good place for Joan Dreer.

Joan Dreer will be the first woman engineer at Sunnyvale. On learning that their new supervisor will be a woman, several of the engineers inform Jim Grimaldi that they don't like the idea of a woman supervising their work.

What, if anything, should Jim Grimaldi do to prepare for Joan Dreer's arrival?

II

Joan Dreer has been with the Sunnyvale division for several months now. As project engineer she has been supervising the work of several engineering groups involved in automotive brake design. As a projects manager, Jim Grimaldi is Joan Dreer's supervisor. The contracts Joan Dreer's groups have been working on have tight deadlines and allow only extremely narrow margins for error. So, the engineering groups have had to work at maximum speed and under a great deal of pressure. Jim Grimaldi has become increasingly concerned about the work of the groups under Joan Dreer's supervision. He comments:

A couple of months ago I was sent a new engineer from our plant in Los Angeles, Joan Dreer, and told to put her to work right away as a project engineer. The company was making a push to move women into all company levels but had apparently run into a lot of problems with their engineers down in Los Angeles. They had decided that our place would have the fewest problems adjusting to women and they were pretty insistent that we find a way to work things out. When I first took Joan around our plant so she could get to know the men and the kind of work we do, several of the engineers took me aside and let me know in no uncertain terms that they didn't want a woman to supervise their work. To make matters worse, Joan came on as a pushy and somewhat aggressive feminist. When one of the young engineers asked her if she was a "Miss" or a "Mrs.", she retorted that her private life was her own affair and that he should get used to calling her "Ms."

Jim has not found any of the groups under Joan's supervision outrightly refusing to work. But they do seem to have been dragging their feet in small ways so that sometimes they miss their deadlines. The other groups have also been showing some reluctance to cooperate with the groups under Joan Dreer's supervision. So, Jim has become increasingly concerned about the impact Joan Dreer's presence seems to be having on his ability to meet deadlines, and he is concerned about how this might affect his own career. He is also worried about the safety factor involved in the brake design. He concludes:

I agree that it's important to move women into supervisory positions in the company, but I don't know whether we can really afford to do it just yet. Women aren't really suited for this kind of work. I don't want to fire any of my engineers. That would be unfair since they have worked hard in the past under a lot of pressure. What should I do?

What do you think Jim Grimaldi should do? Explain. What are the ethical issues involved, and how should they

be approached?

[Parts I and II of this case study are from Manuel Velasquez, Business Ethics, 1st ed. (Englewood Cliff, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1981, p. 6.)

III

Parts I and II provide little information about Joan Dreer and how she happened to come to the Sunnyvale division. Consider the following possible background information.

Joan Dreer was excited about her transfer to Sunnyvale. But she was also apprehensive. Although she had received very high marks for her work at the Los Angeles headquarters of Universal Corporation, she just gone through an unpleasant experience. Her immediate supervisor made it very clear that, in return for her recent promotion in Universal at Los Angeles, he expected sexual favors. When she resisted, he became verbally abusive and tried his best to make life miserable for her at Universal. His derisive remarks about women engineers did not go unnoticed by others--several of whom found them quite amusing. Fortunately, her complaints to the corporate ombudsman were taken seriously. Disciplinary action was taken against Joan Dreer's supervisor. Joan Dreer also requested to be transferred to a Universal division that might be expected to be more receptive to women engineers. So, she hoped that the Sunnyvale division would give her a fresh start.

Unfortunately, Joan Dreer's first day at the Sunnyvale Division proved to be quite a challenge. She took a small group of engineers by surprise as when she entered the Sunnyvale lounge. A young engineer with his back to the door was commenting that he didn't like the idea of being told how to do his work by a woman, but that he would figure out how to handle the situation once he found out whether she was a 'Miss' or a 'Mrs'. Another added, "Right, Johnson, what are you going to say to her, "Should we call you 'Miss Honey' or 'Mrs. Honey'?"

The laughter ended abruptly when Joan Dreer's entrance was noticed. Realizing that she was facing her first challenge, she tersely announced, "Mr. Johnson, my private life is my own affair. You'd better get used to calling me 'Ms'."

How, if at all, does this background information change your understanding of situation described in Part II? What do you now think are the major ethical concerns? How would you suggest they be approached?

COMMENTARIES

Ted Lockhart

I

Jim may feel initially that he has no obligation to do anything special to prepare for Joan's arrival. He may believe that it is the responsibility of supervisors and of the persons they supervise to work out any conflicts that may arise. He may feel that if women are to function effectively as managers at Universal, then they must be able to deal with and overcome the sorts of attitudes that are in evidence among the male engineers at Sunnyvale without any special consideration or accommodation.

However, this would be a superficial and shortsighted attitude for Jim to have. Joan should not have to overcome more obstacles because she is a woman than she would have to overcome if she were a man. Perhaps it is true that the world is imperfect and that women do often have to overcome additional obstacles. However, those

obstacles should at least be minimized, and Jim seems to be the best person to minimize them in this situation. Therefore, Jim should discuss with the engineers whom Joan will supervise what the company policy is regarding women employees at Universal, why it is important to accept and implement that policy at Sunnyvale, why Joan is qualified for the job that she has been assigned, and why it is important both for Joan and for the engineers that she will supervise not to make her job more difficult than it already is. To make Joan's job more difficult simply because she is a woman would be unfair. It is one's ethical obligation not only not to cause injustice but also to prevent and correct injustices cause by others. The engineers whom Joan will supervise should not place obstacles in her way, and Jim should take reasonable measures to prevent them from doing so.

II

At first glance, this appears to be a case in which duties of justice, to Joan and to women generally, conflict with the "safety, health, and welfare of the general public." If viewed in this light, it seems reasonable to conclude that, while social justice is important as a long-term goal, the more urgent and immediate concern is public safety, which, if not accorded primary importance, may result in deaths and serious injury. However, there may be a way of resolving the difficulties without removing Joan from her supervisory position. One idea is to have a meeting of all of the engineers that Joan supervises and of the engineers in the groups that are not cooperating with Joan's groups together with Joan herself and Jim. The purpose of such a meeting would be to try to get people's feelings expressed openly and to try to clear the air. This meeting would, no doubt, be unpleasant especially for Joan, who may be unwilling to subject herself to such an ordeal. But the end result might be an eventual meeting of minds or at least an accommodation that would enable the groups to function effectively and in a timely fashion. Of course, the risk is that the meeting, and the expression of feelings, resentments, etc., might make matters worse. However, it would be a risk worth taking, especially if the current state of affairs were unacceptable, since it may salvage something from the current situation. It would have to be made clear to everyone that, whatever the outcome, future work must be of acceptably high quality and also must be completed on schedule.

What if Joan and the male engineers cannot reach a suitable accommodation? It is unlikely that attempting to coerce the engineers into changing their behavior in a satisfactory way would be successful. Even if the resisting engineers could all be replaced, which is highly unlikely, firing them seems too drastic. Thus, if something must give, removing Joan from her supervisory position seems to be a lesser evil than removing the engineers that she is now supervising. However, before taking further action, Jim should re-examine his own attitudes about women supervisors at Sunnyvale and about Joan in particular. His statements that "Joan came on as a pushy and somewhat aggressive feminist" and that "[w]omen aren't really suited for this kind of work" indicate that Jim himself harbors some anti-women prejudices and is not completely sold on having women supervisors under his direction. For example, would a man who exhibited Joan's behavior be described in some similar derogatory way, or would he be characterized more positively as "ambitious and hard-driving"? Maybe Jim should be more honest with himself about his own attitudes toward women as professional colleagues. Perhaps some soul-searching would help him both to understand the attitudes of the male engineers at Sunnyvale and to do what is necessary to help Joan succeed in a supervisory capacity.

III

This background information certainly does explain Joan's very defensive reaction to her first encounter with the male engineers at Sunnyvale. And perhaps it represents a common experience of far too many women who try to succeed in traditionally male-dominated fields like engineering. If so, then perhaps it shows that it is not enough

simply to remove barriers that have traditionally kept women out of engineering altogether--e.g. discouraging women from majoring in engineering in college, the absence of role models for women who might be inclined to choose engineering as a career, etc. Perhaps it shows that, without aggressively and consistently encouraging women to enter engineering and to remain in engineering and changing the culture of engineering so that women engineers are not viewed as oddities, the day when women will be fully accepted in engineering will not arrive in the foreseeable future. If so, then perhaps in the interests of social justice and of not depriving engineering of the talents and intelligence of over 50% of the population "special treatment" for women engineers is warranted. Such special treatment would include recognizing that women engineers typically must overcome many obstacles that men do not usually have to contend with. In this case, Joan must deal with sexual harassment, which men ordinarily do not encounter. Her defensive reaction to what may have been intended only to be humorous and innocent is much more understandable and excusable in light of her background. Even though the male engineers perhaps did not know this about her at the time, their awareness of the fact that her circumstances are unfortunately all too common for professional women should help them not to overreact to her behavior. It should also help Jim Grimaldi to create an atmosphere at Sunnyvale in which incidents like her initial encounter with the engineers do not occur or, if they do occur, they are quickly defused and do not escalate into situations like that occurring in Scenario II.

Lea P. Stewart

Imagine yourself walking down a street in an unfamiliar neighborhood at night. You come to a corner, and you have two choices--walking down a well-lighted street or walking down a dark alley. Which one do you choose? You probably picked the well-lighted street. Given the circumstances, this seems like the reasonable choice. But why? Your choice illustrates a facet of decision making that has received a great deal of research support. When people are asked to make a decision in the absence of full information (you really don't know anything about this hypothetical neighborhood), they usually make their decision on the basis of stereotypes. We choose well-lighted streets because we think they will be safer. In this situation, we are probably right, but what about other situations?

In this case, the engineers at the Sunnyvale division of Universal Corporation make a decision with only limited information, and they make it on the basis of stereotypes. When they hear that their new supervisor is a woman, their perception of her conforms to their stereotyped notions of a "woman boss," and they react to her accordingly. They really don't know anything about her, but they assume that they will have a hard time with her because she is a woman and not like them. And they do. They see her as a "pushy and somewhat aggressive feminist" because she responds to a remark by saying that her private life is her own affair and that she should be called "Ms." not "Miss" or "Mrs." They never really give her a chance to prove herself as a supervisor. In a way, they are experiencing a self-fulfilling prophecy. They believe that they will not be able to get along with a female boss (probably because they have never worked with one before) and so they are not able to get along with Joan.

Joan Dreer also reacts on the basis of her past experience and stereotypes. She has been sexually harassed by her supervisor at her previous assignment for the company. When she hears the engineers debating what to call her, she reacts defensively. She overhears a conversation that seems sexist and she reacts "tersely." She never gives them an opportunity to explain their perception. Her behavior is understandable given her past experiences on the job, but the engineers don't know this and her reaction only confirms their stereotype of a humorless female boss.

A great deal of research has been conducted on the problems faced by organizational tokens--people in the minority on their jobs. In this case, Joan Dreer is a token because she is the first woman engineer at Sunnyvale. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, in her book Men and Women of the Corporation (Basic Books, 1977), has written that organizational tokens are continually reminded that they are different than other people in the organization. The token "stands out" from the group, and his or her behavior is continually scrutinized. The group is likely to see the token's behavior in stereotyped ways because there are not enough tokens to contradict the group's view of the "typical" other.

Joan's problems as a token are magnified by the attitudes of the other engineers. Jim Grimaldi reacts to her situation by "blaming the victim." He notes that, "women aren't really suited for this kind of work." His evidence for this statement seems to be that Joan's subordinates "seem to have been dragging their feet in small ways" and "other groups have also been showing some reluctance to cooperate with the groups under Joan Dreer's supervision." Are these behaviors due to Joan's supervisory techniques or to the negative feelings of the engineers she supervises? Grimaldi never really discusses her actions as a supervisor. He blames all of the actions of the work groups on her and does not assume that they are responsible for their own behavior.

One way to test the ethical situation presented by this case is to put yourself in the position of the person being criticized. How would you react if you were Joan? Imagine that you are the only one of your group (male, female, young, African-American, Asian, handicapped, etc.) in this situation. How would you feel if people treated you like they treated Joan? How would you want to be treated?

All workers deserve to be given a chance to prove themselves on the job. It is sometimes difficult to overcome our stereotypes, but we need to be careful not to let previous perceptions interfere with our current judgments. Joan deserves her chance to prove herself as a supervisor.

John B. Dilworth

Anyone who identifies (as should we all) with the feminist cause of furthering equal rights and equal opportunities for women will find plenty to dislike in this case. It is not too much to say that it is saturated with various kinds and levels of sexual prejudice.

Fortunately, however, those same features do make the case a useful one for some brief criticism and analysis of the vast, pervasive world of prejudice about women. Some idea of the magnitude of this mixture of social and ethical problems becomes apparent through looking closely at the conventional ways of thinking and talking about women which occur in this case. Sadly, these are indeed all too conventional and common. Sex prejudice is so widespread and ingrained in our culture that most of the time we hardly even notice it.

First, some ethical basics. Surely we can agree that people with unprejudiced views of men and women would treat them both simply as human beings or persons. This means that any special features distinguishing women from men, and vice-versa, would be ignored in making business or professional judgments about a person of either sex. The ethical imperative that women ought to be treated equally with men implies exactly this point, that we ought to ignore sex differences in assessing people in the workplace.

Put in this general form, perhaps most if not all people will agree with this principle. It is exactly analogous to the widely accepted, anti-racist principle that we ought to ignore differences of race among workers. Yet at the same time almost no one is prepared to actually apply our anti-sexist principle to concrete situations such as those described in this case. For if they did, cases such as this one would become utterly trivial.

To see this, try replacing all terms referring to women in the case with similar terms referring to persons, or to men. If the case presented an unprejudiced view of women, the replacement should make no difference to the business problems being presented, but in fact such replacements change everything. Clearly we are relying on all kinds of specific attitudes or beliefs specifically about women (about female humans rather than about humans in general) in our understanding of and judgements about women in the case. Hence we must conclude that the case, as filtered through our conventional understanding of it, is systematically sexist.

It is useful to bring in a comparison to racism once again, because racist prejudices are somewhat more under control in U.S. society than are sexist attitudes. This is not to say that racism has been eliminated, but just that it is no longer so acceptable for most people to unthinkingly adopt traditional racist attitudes in dealing with business problems.

Try a similar experiment of word-substitution as before, but this time use some racial description (such as 'black') in place of the references to women. The result is a revealing intermediate case. Some problems may seem to remain, yet it is embarrassingly clear that they are problematic only because of our residual or latent racist attitudes. (A common explanation of our perceptions in a case such as this is as follows. We have become 'sensitized' through the civil rights movement, etc., to the issue of racism, so it's difficult not to perceive racism and feel guilty about it in such cases.)

These experiments should be sufficient to show the sexism in the current case, and in our habitual perceptions of such cases. But it might be thought that nevertheless we haven't made any real progress toward solving the problems. Even if it is conceded that the 'problems' only seem problematic to people in a sexist society, aren't there still real issues of how to ameliorate or eliminate such pervasive sexist attitudes in the workplace?

The answer to this question is yes, sexist attitudes are indeed serious problems, which do need to be worked on. But note that this issue is no longer about women in the workplace (the overt focus of the current case), but instead it is about attitudes to women in the workplace. Women are the victims of such attitudes, yet our society is so prejudiced that we unthinkingly see the women themselves in such cases as being 'the problem', rather than the sexist attitudes which they (and to a lesser degree all who are 'sensitized' to the problem) have to endure. In effect we are 'blaming the victim' in such cases.

How should we go about eliminating sexist attitudes? That is a big question, but there is one serious trap which must briefly be mentioned and defused. It is all too easy to think that the central problems in sexist attitudes must come from incorrect beliefs or assumptions about the abilities or personalities of women. The cure then might seem to be educational or publicity exercises in which successful, popular women demonstrate their abilities and hence change the beliefs of their audience.

Certainly successful women can act as 'role models' for other women, and help to eliminate a few extreme beliefs in the general populace such as 'no women could ever do X', where X is something that the successful woman demonstrates she can do. However, such approaches are still deeply enmeshed in sexist attitudes, because even the most successful of such demonstrations is still focussed on the woman's abilities as a woman, rather than simply as a person.

To see why this is problematic, imagine that a business demonstration by a woman is so charismatic and successful that the audience come to believe that women in general would make ideal bosses. It should be clear that all we have done is to replace one sexist attitude (women are bad bosses, because they are women) with another (women are ideal or excellent bosses, because they are women.) This latter attitude would doubtless be

easier to live with than the former, but a prejudice in favor of women is still, inescapably, prejudice!

What has gone wrong here, in this misguided attempt to eliminate sexism? Most basically, it has confused the moral imperative, that everyone ought to treat woman equally, with a purely factual claim to the effect that women are at least equal in ability, etc., to men. Whether or not this claim is true (or even meaningful) is totally irrelevant to the moral issue of sex equality.

If we do resolve to live up to our obligation to treat women equally, what is needed instead is a quite different educational program from the above. Our obligation is to ignore differences of sex in the workplace. Hence we would not tolerate sexist attitudes, because they are incompatible with ignoring sex differences. We would seek not to reform or 'improve' such attitudes (through the use of positive role models, etc.), but to totally suppress and destroy them, at least as far as any public expressions of them are concerned.

This may sound excessively protective of women, in that we would be out to silence their sexist critics. But the other side of the coin is that women would get no special treatment whatsoever under this simple but demanding ethical approach. If a woman boss manages poorly, she would be treated exactly like any other poor manager, including being fired if necessary. The desire of head office to get more women into managerial positions would also be resisted as sexist interference. Any person of either sex would be judged purely on their own specific abilities to 'get the job done'. Why would any unprejudiced person want anything else?