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FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Belinda Liao - Case 3 of Cases of Discrimination Against Asian Americans

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Description

A case describing obstacles faced by Asian Americans in the workforce.

Abstract

When Belinda Liao becomes the key negotiator for her company in a new deal they are working on with a personal computer company in China, he discovers that the senior management of the Chinese company are uncomfortable working with her because she is a woman. Meanwhile, when the deal is almost through, the senior management of the Chinese Company begin to want her to sweeten the deal with bribes. When she refuses, the contract goes to one of her company's chief competitors.

Body

Belinda Liao: Background

Personal History: First-generation Chinese-American, born in Hong Kong and raised in a suburb of New York City. Came over from Hong Kong when she was three, and now she and her parents are citizens. Her parents were professors before

immigrating, and now they own and manage a small neighborhood grocery store. Their social life centers around a small neighborhood Chinese immigrant community. Gatherings with non-Chinese people are rare.

High School Accomplishments: One of three Valedictorians of her senior class, Academic Decathlon Team, cross-country team, Westinghouse finalist, president of the Math Club, an accomplished pianist. Admitted to every college where she applied.

College/University: Graduated from MIT with B.S., M.S., and Ph.D. degrees in electrical engineering and computer science. Married a post-doc, Alex Epstein, and divorced two years later.

Employment: Accepted offer as Design Engineer at Dynamo Disk Incorporated, the world's second-largest manufacturer of disk drives for personal computers. Recently promoted to a managerial position after working at Dynamo for 11 years.

Case

Belinda encountered difficulty as a first-line manager. Lacking a sympathetic mentor, she encountered unexpected opposition from her subordinates, who viewed her entry as an affirmative action appointment. It seemed that her people were constantly testing her, no matter how small the incident. With great determination, Belinda found ways to support her people, cards on their birthdays, congratulatory notes, and uncommon listening skills. Slowly, she won them over and her group was soon developing an excellent reputation. She also quieted her management peers by being better prepared for meetings, underrunning her budget, and delivering her key commitments ahead of schedule. Belinda's success was occasionally tempered by self-doubt. Many of her high school friends were raising families, and her parents often hinted about their desire to have grandchildren. Her life also seemed a little out of balance, since she worked an average of over 60 hours per week and rarely took vacations.

Nevertheless, Belinda's reputation and good work caught the attention of a sympathetic sales director. He valued her strong technical background and her Chinese heritage. Would she be interested in leading Dynamo's negotiation team with a key personal computer maker based in Hong Kong? Her social life took a back

seat, and Belinda jumped at the chance, approaching this new task with the same enthusiasm as she did her previous assignments. She studied the history of the Chinese firm, talked to other suppliers, and knew their buying habits and idiosyncrasies. She reviewed her Mandarin Chinese in a night-school class.

Her first customer meeting turned out to be less than she had expected. The customer, while polite, seemed strangely distant. Subsequent meetings resulted in little progress. Belinda befriended an engineer in the Hong Kong company, who confided in her. He indicated that Dynamo had lost credibility by sending a woman, since senior management was more comfortable negotiating with a man. Her heritage presented them with another problem because they expected that her loyalty would first be to the Chinese people and then towards Dynamo. Thus, when she opened the talks with a strong pro-Dynamo position, they were upset.

However, they were impressed with her technical depth and felt that Dynamo's offer was a technically superior one. Unfortunately, it also had the highest price. This engineer felt that if Belinda sweetened the offer with red envelopes (containing money) given to the right decision makers, Dynamo would win the disk-supply contract. He offered to help and even indicated that the amounts need not be large, but that the respect this gesture showed was important.

Belinda realized that the contract was critical to Dynamo's survival. A recession in the United States had significantly hurt earnings, and rumors of more layoffs were rampant. She knew that such practices were commonplace in many parts of the world and that other firms had found ways to hide the payment of these funds. After many sleepless nights, Belinda decided to maintain her integrity and quietly informed her friend in Hong Kong that "red envelopes" were not forthcoming. The firm awarded the contract to Dynamo's chief American competitor two weeks later.

The result of this loss was felt quickly. Dynamo announced major staff cuts. Belinda, unable to deal with the guilt and resultant stress, resigned.

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