

Lea P. Stewart's Commentary on "Bringing in the First Woman"

Commentary On
Bringing in the First Woman

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.