

Lea P. Stewart's Commentary on "Tokenism and Promotion"

Commentary On
Tokenism and Promotion

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.