

Joseph Ellin's Commentary on "Tokenism and Promotion"

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Tokenism and Promotion

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.