

Ted Lockhart's Commentary on "Bringing in the First Woman"

Commentary On
Bringing in the First Woman

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.



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.