



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Bringing in the First Woman

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Description

Jim Grimaldi, project manager in the Sunnyvale division of Universal Corporation, has just learned that in two weeks the headquarters in Los Angeles will be sending him a project engineer, Joan Dreer. Her job will be to supervise small groups of engineers involved in automotive brake design. The Los Angeles headquarters is anxious to move women into all company levels, and it has targeted Grimaldi's engineering division at Sunnyvale as a good place for Joan Dreer.

Abstract

This case is one of thirty-two cases which address a wide range of ethical issues that can arise in engineering practice provided by the Center For the Study of Ethics in Society, Western Michigan University.

Body

I

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Joan Dreer will be the first woman engineer at Sunnyvale. On learning that their new supervisor will be a woman, several of the engineers inform Jim Grimaldi that they don't like the idea of a woman supervising their work.

What, if anything, should Jim Grimaldi do to prepare for Joan Dreer's arrival?



Joan Dreer has been with the Sunnyvale division for several months now. As project engineer she has been supervising the work of several engineering groups involved in automotive brake design. As a projects manager, Jim Grimaldi is Joan Dreer's supervisor. The contracts Joan Dreer's groups have been working on have tight deadlines and allow only extremely narrow margins for error. So, the engineering groups have had to work at maximum speed and under a great deal of pressure. Jim Grimaldi has become increasingly concerned about the work of the groups under Joan Dreer's supervision. He comments:

A couple of months ago I was sent a new engineer from our plant in Los Angeles, Joan Dreer, and told to put her to work right away as a project engineer. The company was making a push to move women into all company levels but had apparently run into a lot of problems with their engineers down in Los Angeles. They had decided that our place would have the fewest problems adjusting to women and they were pretty insistent that we find a way to work things out. When I first took Joan around our plant so she could get to know the men and the kind of work we do, several of the engineers took me aside and let me know in no uncertain terms that they didn't want a woman to supervise their work. To make matters worse, Joan came on as a pushy and somewhat aggressive feminist. When one of the young engineers asked her if she was a "Miss" or a "Mrs.", she retorted that her private life was her own affair and that he should get used to calling her "Ms."

Jim has not found any of the groups under Joan's supervision outrightly refusing to work. But they do seem to have been dragging their feet in small ways so that sometimes they miss their deadlines. The other groups have also been showing some reluctance to cooperate with the groups under Joan Dreer's supervision. So, Jim has become increasingly concerned about the impact Joan Dreer's presence seems to be having on his ability to meet deadlines, and he is concerned about how this might affect his own career. He is also worried about the safety factor involved in the brake design. He concludes:

I agree that it's important to move women into supervisory positions in the company, but I don't know whether we can really afford to do it just yet. Women aren't really suited for this kind of work. I don't want to fire any of my engineers. That would be unfair since they have worked hard in the past under a lot of pressure. What should I do?

What do you think Jim Grimaldi should do? Explain. What are the ethical issues involved, and how should they be approached?

[Parts I and II of this case study are from Manuel Velasquez, *Business Ethics*, 1st ed. (Englewood Cliff, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1981, p. 6.)]



Parts I and II provide little information about Joan Dreer and how she happened to come to the Sunnyvale division. Consider the following possible background information.

Joan Dreer was excited about her transfer to Sunnyvale. But she was also apprehensive. Although she had received very high marks for her work at the Los Angeles headquarters of Universal Corporation, she had just gone through an unpleasant experience. Her immediate supervisor made it very clear that, in return for her recent promotion in Universal at Los Angeles, he expected sexual favors. When she resisted, he became verbally abusive and tried his best to make life miserable for her at Universal. His derisive remarks about women engineers did not go unnoticed by others--several of whom found them quite amusing. Fortunately, her complaints to the corporate ombudsman were taken seriously. Disciplinary

action was taken against Joan Dreer's supervisor. Joan Dreer also requested to be transferred to a Universal division that might be expected to be more receptive to women engineers. So, she hoped that the Sunnyvale division would give her a fresh start.

Unfortunately, Joan Dreer's first day at the Sunnyvale Division proved to be quite a challenge. She took a small group of engineers by surprise when she entered the Sunnyvale lounge. A young engineer with his back to the door was commenting that he didn't like the idea of being told how to do his work by a woman, but that he would figure out how to handle the situation once he found out whether she was a 'Miss' or a 'Mrs'. Another added, "Right, Johnson, what are you going to say to her, 'Should we call you 'Miss Honey' or 'Mrs. Honey'?"

The laughter ended abruptly when Joan Dreer's entrance was noticed. Realizing that she was facing her first challenge, she tersely announced, "Mr. Johnson, my private life is my own affair. You'd better get used to calling me 'Ms'."

How, if at all, does this background information change your understanding of situation described in Part II? What do you now think are the major ethical concerns? How would you suggest they be approached?

Notes

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