

Henry West's Commentary on "Tokenism and Promotion"

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Judy Hanson and Catherine Morris work in different areas at Darnell; so it may be that Judy doesn't recognize Catherine's leadership qualities and organizational skills as well as those who are considering her for the promotion. As a social friend, Judy may have seen a different side of Catherine's personality and, as a result, not seen the side that displays the qualifications for a Chief Engineer. Sometimes one doesn't recognize qualities in a good friend that one would see in people that one didn't know as well. "Familiarity breeds contempt" goes the proverb. When someone that you know well does something extraordinary, it can come as a surprise.

It is also possible that Judy shares the same prejudice against women in leadership positions that many men in the company apparently have and that pervade the general culture. Unconsciously, she may also be jealous of Catherine for being the first woman to be promoted to that high a level in the company. Judy should certainly do some soul-searching before she does anything except provide support, encouragement, and congratulations.

How would Judy feel if she were the one who was being considered for promotion, and Catherine had serious doubts about Judy's being the one for the job? Would she like it if Catherine expressed those feelings to others in the company, thus working against her promotion? Would she like it if Catherine even expressed those doubts to Judy, which would not increase her self-confidence at a critical time. With friends like that, who would need enemies?

If Judy's friend Tom were being considered for the position, would Judy even think of doing anything in regard to his promotion in a different area of the company, even if she felt that he didn't have the strong leadership qualities or the organizational skills needed. She would have hoped him the best. So she will hope Catherine the best.

After all, what is going to happen if Catherine doesn't do well in the job? Will it really take its toll on other women at Darnell, or will it have broken the ice for women's promotions with the result that women be considered for other promotions. Once there is a woman in a senior position, the company may feel that it has to promote another to compensate, in case Catherine is demoted. And Catherine may rise to the occasion and do well. Judy should certainly do nothing to prevent her from having the chance.

Suppose, however, that Judy believes that Catherine's promotion is a deliberate effort to discredit Affirmative Action. She believes that management is deliberately putting a woman in a position over her head in order to counteract the pressure from the women in the company that some of them be promoted to senior positions. Management wants Catherine to fail in order to quiet the women's criticism. What then? Should Judy try to organize a women's caucus to come up with a unified reaction to the promotion?

Suppose, further, that the women in Quality Control, which is Catherine's department, do not think that Catherine is qualified and they think that another woman in the department is the person for the job? They come to Judy and ask her to help them persuade Catherine to turn down the promotion in favor of the other woman. Should Judy agree?

If Judy overhears male engineers remarking that Catherine will never be able to handle the job and that this will show how foolish, and potentially harmful, affirmative action is, the easiest thing to do would be to pretend that she hasn't heard. But the men are engaged in politically significant conversation, and, if Judy believes in Affirmative Action, she would be negligent if there is anything she can say which would help to rebut the conclusion to which the men are coming. Even if she doesn't believe that Catherine's promotion is wise, and even if she does believe that it will be taken as evidence that women don't make good leaders, she might be able to think of something appropriate to say to the men to defend Affirmative Action.

Whether to say something to the men might depend upon the atmosphere in the company. If Affirmative Action is official policy, genuinely supported by upper management, or it is at least generally given lip service, and the men would be embarrassed by having been overheard in such a conversation, she might make a

point of letting them know that she had heard. If, on the other hand, women were admitted into positions very grudgingly and with a lot of hostility, she might simply be making life difficult for herself without helping any.

Whether to say anything might also depend upon Judy's personality. If she is the sort of person who can make a sarcastic remark, which will make people think twice but not really angry, she might say, "Every male who's been promoted has been able to handle the job; so all we have to do is promote a male--is that right?"

Tom Evans, overhearing the conversation, might be able to join it in a serious way more easily than Judy. The fact that he overheard it would probably not put the men on the defensive. He could point out that whether she could handle it or not remained to be seen. It's a difficult job and lots of men in the department or company are not as good candidates as she. Give her a chance or find someone better qualified, but judge her by her abilities, not by her gender.

If they overhear the conversation together, they might each make the kind of remarks indicated.

The above are assuming that Judy and Tom both favor Affirmative Action. Judy and Tom may not agree or may not know that they agree. These situations have to be played out in the specific context. Here, as often in ethics, there may be no general rules that apply. Judy and Tom may simply have to do what seems most appropriate, given a sensitivity to the effects of what they might do or say.