

## Problems in Review

*Unless managers help female (and minority) employees to be more assertive when faced with subtle discrimination, the problems won't go away and the employees might*

*If asked to rate their most taxing problems at work, most managers would probably put those involving managing people at, or near, the top of their list. One reason "people problems" are so difficult is that every individual is different, no problem is the same, and destructive behavior is hard to diagnose and cure. But another major role is that the manager may also be part of the problem. Incidents of subtle discrimination in organizations because of sex (or race) have all the foregoing difficulties and more, in that by definition they are hard to recognize. But small and petty as they may seem, they can have serious and destructive consequences. HBR sent this case to a selection of subscribers for their opinions on the issues it raises and on how to deal with them: Who is to blame in such incidents? Are they a serious problem? Is there anything management can do to prevent subtle discrimination? In the commentary following the case, the author discusses the respondents' replies as well as tactics managers can use to deal with such problems when they occur.*

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Mary P. Rowe

## Case of the valuable vendors

Harry Fenway is one of the best computer salesmen on the eastern seaboard. He sells equipment for Data-Run Corporation, one of the largest computer manufacturers in the world. His sales record is impressive. The company, which has lagged in recent years because of growing competition, is just ready to test-market a minicomputer model with which it hopes to recapture its share of the market. The company expects big things of Harry for this project launch; to top management he is nearly indispensable.

Gwen Barrett is an up-and-coming junior salesperson whom the company hired in a trainee program

specifically to increase the number of women employees in sales. The computer industry has historically been a good employer of women, especially in systems analysis. Lately, Data-Run headquarters had decided there should be more women in sales and had made it a high-priority development program for division managers. One of the main reasons for this emphasis, aside from EEO goals, is that recently more women have been found in buyer positions in companies acquiring new computer equipment; Gwen has really hit it off with one such buyer already.

One hot, steamy day, Gwen asked to see the division manager, Sam Finch. She and Harry had just returned from a sales trip to a large manufacturing company in Connecticut, United Chemicals, Inc., where they signed a contract they had been trying to get for months. It was a great coup; Finch, very pleased, thinks "they obviously work well together." When Gwen asked to see him, Finch got ready to welcome a happy worker. What greeted him was an unhappy woman.

Harry, Gwen says, is the worst kind of macho, male chauvinist pig. His symptoms, she reports, are offensive: he berates his wife; he makes too many inquiries into her (Gwen's) personal life; in front of senior men they meet on the trip, he acts as if she were his property; he is patronizing; he tells dirty jokes to other men in her presence; and he interrupts her when she talks. Twice he has failed to introduce her to people they meet.

Gwen complains that she'd tried to stay reasonable and calm about it and had overlooked Harry's behavior

because he was such a good salesman and she felt she could learn about the business from him. But, she tells Finch indignantly, she feels alternately invisible and like a showpiece. Up to now, she had accepted the situation, but on this last trip she overheard a UCI buyer asking Harry why on earth Data-Run would send out a woman. Gwen hoped Harry would mention her *magna cum laude* as a math major and her excellent sales record. Instead, she heard Harry insinuating to this buyer that he had been sleeping with her. That did it. She insists that she would not work with Harry again. She wants to be transferred.

Sam Finch listens to Gwen and then asks Harry to come in, telling Gwen he'll see her later. Much to Sam's surprise, Harry does not get defensive at all. In fact, he is astounded that Gwen has asked for a transfer. He thinks she's overreacting to a few one-liners that maybe were a little blue. But, he says, she's a big girl and if she's going to play in the big leagues, she's going to have to take it like a man. Harry laughs. He thinks Gwen is a really sweet kid and brightens things up a lot, but he wouldn't worry if he were Sam. He advises Sam just to talk her up, and she'll come around.

Sam talks to Gwen again. No way, she says; Harry is a dyed-in-the-wool MCP and it just isn't worth it to hang around. She can find a job elsewhere, there's no problem with that. The computer industry is wide open for someone with her capabilities and training; she has had a number of job offers already. Sam tries more persuasion. She responds that he doesn't really understand either, does he? It's not only she, she adds, the women buyers don't think Harry's patter is so great either; she's talked with a number of them and they, too, find Harry offensive.

In fact, Gwen says to Sam, she bets that in the future Harry's sales record will not be as great as it has been in the past. And it's just possible that the minicomputer test launch could be affected. Think it over, Sam, she says, and let me

know how it comes out. I'm flexible, but some things just aren't worth it.

What can Sam do? He needs Gwen for the sake of his EEO record, as well as for the simple fact that she is an excellent salesperson. He needs Harry for his experience, and he also needs to test that new product. What would you do if you were Sam?

The purpose of the "Case of the Valuable Vendors" was to raise questions about subtle discrimination as a management problem. Most major U.S. corporations have been managed primarily by white males, many of whom have been working very hard to open opportunities to others. And many of these managers are still struggling to employ women and minorities more effectively. But minority and female newcomers to these corporations frequently complain of the "coldness of the atmosphere" and of prejudice, even when management feels certain that no overtly illegal discriminatory practices persist. Puzzled top managers have begun to ask, "What, if anything, is subtle discrimination?"

The case then asks the reader: *Is there a problem here? Is Harry behaving in a sexist fashion? Is Gwen just imagining discrimination? The management concerns are several: (1) is this situation serious; (2) what is it about, and whose problem is it; and (3) what should be done? (Although the case raises questions about sexism only, it could as easily have dealt with issues of race, religion, handicap, age, or national origin—all of which are very frequently raised in allegations of prejudice. In my experience, however, discrimination because of race or sex is by far the most common.)*

HBR sent this case to 250 male and 250 female subscribers, in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, for their anonymous comment. The 42 women and 61 men who responded were not intended to be a "representative sample" of U.S. managers. Analysis of the readers' comments, therefore, simply suggests the opinions and feelings of contemporary management.

First, I present the respondents' opinions on the case, with some analysis of the similarities and differences between male and female responses. Second, I discuss the issues, the case, and the comments, from the perspective of having dealt with and consulted on several thousand similar cases.

### HBR readers comment on the critical issues

Before discussing the readers' comments as a whole, let us look briefly at how they feel about the three main issues the case raises.

1. *Is the issue between Gwen and Harry a serious management problem?* Nearly all respondents think Data-Run management has a serious problem on its hands. However, readers vary widely in defining that problem. About one-fourth believe the case is mainly about a personality conflict or lack of professionalism. Many comment simply that Data-Run is facing an incident of discrimination; about three-quarters mention the "equal opportunity" aspects of the case. However, that phrase generally connotes different things to different people. Some people think in terms of EEO goals; many people think in terms of lawsuits.

In this case, many of the respondents believe that the environment for women will affect Data-Run's ability to meet EEO goals. But only a few raise the possibility that Gwen might go to court. There is, then, an overall view that the story represents some kind of serious problem, with equal opportunity aspects. But within this broad consensus there is wide disagreement about the kinds of questions the case presents.

2. *What kind and whose problem is it?* Most readers think that, at base, Harry is in some way seriously at fault. These readers find him "a bully," "a super-pig," "monumentally insensitive," "an MCP," "deficient," "inadequate," and "unable to cope with women." Many readers find Harry's behavior "typical," but conclude that since times are chang- [Continued on page 44]

ing, Harry's behavior is insupportable. Although some male readers suggest that Harry's personalized, joking salesmanship used to be effective, readers of both sexes think he is very quickly becoming obsolete.

Respondents also widely blame Gwen for her behavior in this situation, for her "defensiveness" and "immaturity," and for not having dealt directly with Harry. However, women, far more than men, blame Gwen. On the average, by the time the case came to Sam, readers had found both Gwen and Harry at fault. About half the women and one-fifth of the men also find fault with Sam. Some of these respondents feel that if Sam had been on his toes, the problem would not have arisen. Others think Sam made the problem worse by his handling of it.

Nearly all readers feel Harry is initially the most seriously to blame. However, only one or two criticize Harry's handling of the complaint as voiced to him by Sam. That is, though most think he had misbehaved on the road, few find fault with his manner of discussing the problem with Sam. It is Gwen and Sam who get the blame for the handling of the situation; almost nobody thinks that Gwen or Sam acted correctly. However, male and female readers vary somewhat in their analyses of Gwen and Sam.

The women's responses are generally quite critical; most are concerned with analyzing behavior. Nearly half of the women strongly criticize Gwen's handling of the case. Half also criticize Sam's behavior. Female responses are typically: "Gwen should have worked out her Harry problems with Harry"; "Sam should not have let Harry tell him what to do."

Most male respondents are much less critical of the protagonists and simply concentrate on what should happen now. On the other hand, male respondents who do criticize Gwen or Sam tend to couch their criticisms somewhat differently from the females. Men are much more likely to describe the personal attributes of Gwen and Sam than to analyze their behavior. This is especially true with respect to Gwen,

who received the more frequent comments. Thus the most typical male criticism is in the form: "Gwen is a women's libber," or "Sam is an inadequate manager."

Women respondents tend, first, to recognize Harry's objectionable behavior and, second, to criticize Gwen's and Sam's handling of the scene. Most women then make suggestions about what Sam and Gwen should do now. Most male respondents, first, either simply prescribe a general solution or point out Harry's offensive attributes and, second, criticize Gwen's inadequate attributes. Finally, most men then prescribe specific solutions for Sam.

### 3. What should Data-Run do?

Nearly all readers comment very thoughtfully on how to handle Gwen and Harry, and many carefully give the rationale for their suggestions.

The responses vary somewhat between men and women respondents; the variety within each sex is, however, considerable. Male readers' responses range from "Good-by Gwen!" to "Tell Harry to shape up, and he will." From women came comments ranging from "Profit-making means get rid of Gwen" to frequent suggestions for assertiveness training workshops for Gwen and sensitivity training for everyone in the company.

Perhaps the most striking difference in the responses lies in whether a given reader is hopeful or hopeless about Gwen and Harry being able to work together. Both male and female respondents express a range of opinions about whether Harry and Gwen could or should continue to work together, and whether Sam should deal with them at the same time.

Only one-third of the respondents counsel sitting down with Gwen and Harry together. Most of the rest (and especially men) think Sam should meet separately with each. One-fifth of the men and half the women would thereafter firmly reassign Gwen and Harry together, "for the good of the company," after attempts either to mediate or to lay down the law. Others would at least "give it a try." But most men and some women think that Harry

and Gwen would be absolutely unable to work as a team. (Some men further counsel that Gwen should deal with women buyers; Harry with men.)

The women are more apt than the men to suggest that Sam seek outside advice in handling this problem. Many women characterize subtle discrimination as extremely pervasive and tenacious and comment frequently on the high personal price they have paid and still pay from having to deal with subtle sexism. Such women seem to feel it will take a long-term effort to create an equal opportunity environment at Data-Run.

The male readers more often recommend that Sam simply give a warning to Harry to shape up. Many men appear to believe that such advice might actually work. Many also note that "times have changed; American business is simply not going to be sexist in the future."

In many ways, male and female responses are similar. Both sexes call for Sam to check out the facts, to "examine his own motives and feelings," to "take a position of leadership." And both look forward to a future with many more women buyers and salespeople.

Men and women contributed equally eloquent and caring letters about the strong feelings cases like these arouse in them, and they share the single most common response: "Of course Harry is an MCP, but Gwen will meet many more." Both sexes appear basically to feel that managers must deal with these issues and not run away from them or pretend they do not exist.

Also, men and women respondents equally mention the anger, bewilderment, and fear people experience from recent changes in women's roles, and many contribute good ideas for companies to deal with these changes. These ideas include strong statements of commitment from the top, in-house and out-of-house training programs, specific training for people like Harry, continued monitoring by people in Sam's shoes, and various in-house, equal opportunity support systems, [Continued on page 48]



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such as the building of a women's network.

### Subtle discrimination in organizations

The majority of respondents conclude that this case is serious and that it has important equal opportunity aspects. I agree. I also agree with those who think that personality conflict and professionalism are important components of the case and deserve Sam's concern. However, the equal opportunity issues seem to me the most critical. And I think U.S. corporations need to get to the point where these unequal opportunity problems are dealt with by managers, rather than by judges and government agencies.

In my six years at MIT, I have come to believe that though the law plays a legitimate role in achieving equal opportunity, the most critical problems are not and should not be covered by the courts. Regulations and legislation that cover affirmative action and equal opportunity open doors and set limits to abuse. And this kind of regulation is needed (although it could be vastly improved). But the law is not and cannot be sufficient to guarantee freedom from subtle discrimination, which I am persuaded is now the major equal opportunity question facing large corporations and institutions in the United States.

But by its nature subtle discrimination is very difficult to address. One can define discrimination. For the purposes of this article, let me define it as the damaging stereotyping of an individual with respect to irrelevant characteristics of any group, race, or sex to which the individual may belong. Subtle discrimination refers to covert, nonobvious, or "petty" behavior, most of which could never be taken to the courts because it seems so trivial or is so difficult to prove. Defining this problem in the abstract is, however, much easier than recognizing it in practice.

When minorities and women (or white males) feel they are being discriminated against, people of

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goodwill may differ completely in their judgments of what is happening. The courts are currently wrestling with major, relatively clear-cut discrimination issues, with no social consensus in sight. Subtle and apparently petty discrimination problems are all the more difficult. If it is so difficult a problem to recognize, why then do we need to look at it?

*Damaging effects of subtle discrimination:* Women (and minorities) have said for years that in very subtle ways white-male work environments can be extremely difficult for non-traditional members. Several writers and analysts suggest that "micro-aggressions" and "micro-inequities" in the aggregate constitute formidable support to racism and sexism.<sup>1</sup>

The damage done by these incidents occurs in varying ways and for varying reasons. Among the most damaging patterns that I have observed is that such incidents, if unchecked, often lead to yet worse

behavior. In addition, unlike some other work problems, discriminatory incidents are unpredictable and catch women and minorities off guard. Since they have to be ignored, denied, or dealt with, they take up time and psychic energy. Also they may prevent something better from happening; for instance, Harry should have been training Gwen.

Incidents of subtle discrimination may produce a negative Pygmalion effect: if Harry assumes Gwen is an ornament or a sex object, she may begin to behave like one. These incidents may also produce negative role modeling: if women buyers see Gwen passively accept Harry's offensive comments, they may lose confidence themselves. Because the experience of each race and sex is so unique to itself, subtle incidents of discrimination simply emphasize the differences and sustain systematic barriers between people of different races and sexes. These barriers can be serious for management. For

instance, I often see evidence that it is hard for men and women, minority and nonminority, to judge accurately each other's performance.

These incidents cause damage for a number of reasons: they are so subtle the victim may work in constant uncertainty, often in emotional turmoil, often blaming himself or herself. People judge such incidents so differently that dealing with them may worsen communication still further, and there are few institutionalized, appropriately weighted forms [Continued on page 52]

1. Margaret Campbell, *Why Would a Girl Go into Medicine?* (New York: Ann O'Shea, 1973); Chester Pierce, "Offensive Mechanisms," in *The Black 70's*, ed. Floyd Barbour (Boston: Sargent, 1970, p. 265); Wesley Profit, "Blacks in Homogeneous and Heterogeneous Racial Groups: the Effects of Racism and the Mundane Extreme Environment," unpublished PhD. dissertation, Harvard University, 1977; Mary P. Rowe, "The Saturn's Rings Phenomenon: Micro-Inequities and Unequal Opportunity in the American Economy," *Proceedings of the NSF Conference on Women's Leadership and Authority*, University of California, Santa Cruz, Calif., 1977; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965).



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of redress for such subtle and petty incidents. It is, as some readers comment, "too much" for Gwen to go to Sam. But, unhappily, as she doesn't know how to seek appropriate redress at Data-Run, Gwen imagines going still further, in effect, to leave.

Subtle incidents of sexism and racism may appear insignificant to white males, but their apparent pettiness can be misleading. When white males get harassed and mistreated, as they do, they are generally aware of it and see it as unjust and as unrelated to themselves. But the difference with subtle discrimination is that it is made up of incidents all hitting the same sore spot, a spot that cannot be changed.

In case you are a white male reader who has read this far but cannot understand why subtle discrimination is important, try this idea. Think back to your childhood and adolescence, and remember the one thing you were most sensitive about. Were you always being

compared to your older brother? Were you touchy about your nose, your skin, your muscles, your "cowardice" in some situation? Let's say you still are touchy about this personal problem.

Now try to imagine that everyone around you at work knows this is your weak spot and keeps referring to it obliquely and directly, consciously and unconsciously. Now imagine that every professional mistake you make and every professional shortcoming is still attributed to your failure to be as good as your brother (or whatever you saw as your weak spot). Imagine that your brother, or people you saw as better than you, are *always* in positions over you.

If you were ever sensitive in this way about something irrelevant to performance that you could not change, you perhaps can appreciate how threatening Harry appeared to Gwen, and how damaging was his behavior.

*Coping with discrimination:* By and large most respondents feel that though Harry is the original problem, Gwen must deal with it. She should, as some readers say, have "tried with tact, and humor" to "earn Harry's respect." She should have taken a firm stand, for instance, about introducing herself. As one reader comments, Gwen "should not have tried to overlook Harry's behavior, when she realized she was really becoming upset." She should have tried instead to find an appropriate time to lay out to Harry her concerns, and if necessary she should have spoken with him several times.

I would not, myself, have suggested the direct confrontation some readers recommend (several say, "Let him have it"). Gwen should first have tried a gentler, straightforward approach. But I agree with those who comment, "Gwen must learn to handle this herself"; "Gwen will meet people like Harry everywhere; there is no place to hide."

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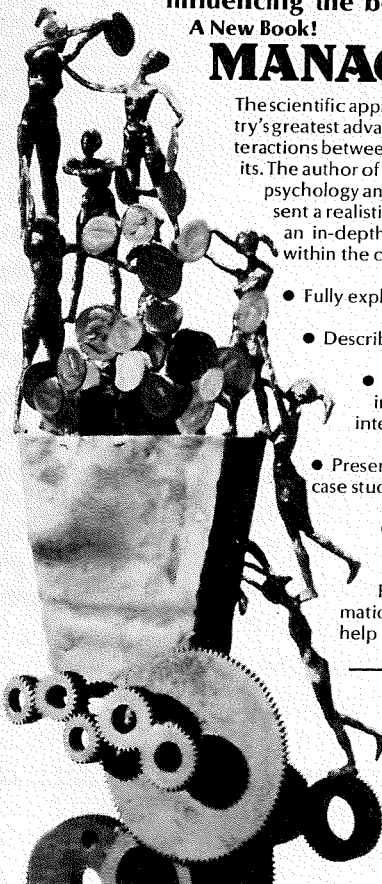
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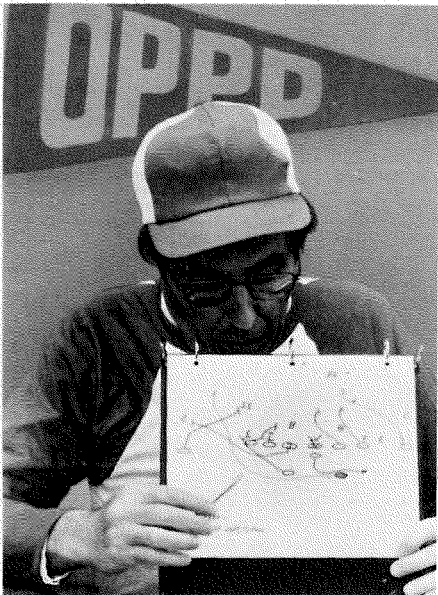
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Many people who work with women's problems in organizations think that if women are going to succeed, they have to be able to earn the respect of colleagues who harass them. Most believe that this is best done by excellent work and maintaining a professional demeanor. But it isn't easy to take on the responsibility of dealing in a mature way with someone who is harassing you. And some women and minorities are offended by what they see as further injustice in this prescription for success, since it requires a victim to bear the original aggression and then seek her or his own redress as well.

Many blacks and women might be perfectly willing to try to defend and assert themselves, but at the same time they know that they will pay for their self-defense. Many white males expect a subtle deference from minorities and women, not assertiveness. One has to be willing to be called aggressive, bitchy, uppity, castrating, and humorless—and, understandably, many people hate being thought of in these ways more than being pushed around. In any case, any reader who wishes Gwen were more assertive needs to be prepared for what happens when she actually is.

Let us imagine that Gwen pleasantly, humorously, firmly, gently, consistently, and, if necessary, repeatedly objects when Harry is aggressive. If Harry is sufficiently able and emotionally healthy, he will try to change. Gwen will learn to trust him, Data-Run will be well off, and the good model of male-female relations will tend to spread.

But imagine Harry is not in such good shape. When they sense competition from a woman, some men begin to sexualize work relationships in order to reestablish traditional male-female dominance patterns. If Harry was beginning to do this and sees Gwen as "rejecting" him, he may become hateful and angry, even (consciously or unconsciously) vengeful. At the least, he may be simply bewildered, back off, and spread the word that she is a prickly bitch. Sam, in this scenario, might have been met not by a fuming Gwen but by a hostile, grouchy Harry. Or Sam

might have heard about it first when other salesmen refused to work with other junior women, since Gwen was seen as "castrating."

It is also possible that Harry, who has never before had a female peer, let alone one out on the road with him, was afraid of becoming friendly with Gwen. Perhaps Harry had been holding Gwen at arm's length, in his locker-room way (the only way he knows), so his wife would not murder him for his wandering eye or thoughts.

If Gwen is "assertive" and successfully establishes a respectful relationship with Harry, he may find himself sincerely attracted to her. Even though Gwen might know nothing of Harry's esteem, Sam might hear of "the affair" from Mrs. Fenway or other salespeople. In that case, Sam will have to have the wit to backtrack, find out what happened, and then help support Gwen in having been assertive in the first place.

Obviously, Gwen needs to hold her head high and explore the possibilities for making a place for herself. And, plainly, U.S. corporations need the largely unexplored talents of women. Although no one can anticipate the consequences of corporate "Gwens" becoming independent adults, all of us in U.S. corporations and institutions are going to have to deal with them.

As it happened, Gwen went to Sam. She may have felt proud of herself for not quitting outright—for "hanging in." Or she may have been taught as a child that when she was harassed, she should appeal to authority rather than fight for herself. Then again, she may have decided to grin and bear it, as long as she could. And then, perhaps feeling that her behavior was strong, she went to Sam, not to ask for help like a weak female but to "take an independent stand."

What Gwen cannot see, however, is that she needs support to deal with the kind of harassment to which she was subject. She cannot see that asking for help is not being weak and that what she was doing was not strong. Gwen probably can

[Continued on page 58]

not see clearly what she could have been doing, what options were open to her.

Sam's job at this point is very important. He needs to understand why Gwen came in and to help her see that asking for help may be a first step in being appropriately assertive and not the last before going out the door. Sam also needs both to help Gwen become more assertive and, at the same time, to not undermine her independence or make her feel unsupported. How can Sam do this?

I agree with those respondents who think that Sam should initially have tried to find out exactly what was going on. Then he should have taken hold of the situation in a more assertive way himself. Many readers feel that "Harry was calling all the shots" and resent Sam's lack of leadership before and during this incident. This is a critical point.

If two requirements for equal opportunity are that women and minority employees should strive for excellence and assert themselves, another is clearly that top management should take a strong, consistent, outspoken stand on opening doors and preventing abuse.

Sam and his supervisors should all along have been talking casually and firmly about equal opportunity and Data-Run's need for all the talent it can find. They should have been making their opinions and policies on equal opportunity so well known throughout the company that Harry would have been immediately uncomfortable about his behavior, when called on it. And they need to affirm to women and minorities, many of whom have been taught not to be assertive with white males, that reasonable self-expression will be supported.

In the case situation, Sam has good strategies open to him. The first is to work with Gwen at length so that she will feel she can handle Harry herself. Sam could discuss with her possible ways to stick up for herself. He could role play with her how she will respond next time and should let her know that he will back her in every reasonable and responsible action she takes.

In counseling both supervisors and supervisees, I have found this tactic very effective. It is incumbent on any manager who wants minorities and women to handle incidents of discrimination effectively themselves to be very explicit about such a policy. But it is sometimes difficult for managers to convince their employees to try to assert themselves responsibly. If Gwen is reluctant to try, Sam will have to try to convince her that she *has* to help herself, because she will find "Harrys" everywhere. Sam's other major strategy may be to find mentors and advisers for Gwen.

Obviously, Sam needs to talk further with Harry, as well, to discuss the real meaning of equal opportunity, of decent manners, and of the changing world. Sam could also explicitly ask Harry to train Gwen well and then role play with *him* how he could do it. One reader suggests that Sam should get Harry and Gwen to prepare a skit to present at the annual meeting, which would help teach others about male-female training situations. Other readers point out that Harry could make a real name for himself as a successful innovator if he would learn how to train newcomers. These suggestions may help Gwen and may also help Harry feel that he has something to gain (besides protecting his job) from changing his behavior.

Sam might also encourage Gwen to seek out other women for support. More and more managers are learning that responsible women's networks are a powerful aid to furthering nonpolarized equal opportunity. In-house women's luncheon groups tend to give fanatics (if any) a place to let off steam, while giving leverage and support to responsible women with responsible concerns.

Like many other management people, I am no longer interested in academic debates about role models versus mentors. I see daily evidence that minorities and women thrive best when supported and inspired by a variety of mentors and models, male and female, black and white, peer and superior. What Sam can do is to mobilize any available support for Gwen, including himself.

I would not encourage Sam to separate Gwen and Harry until he has tried hard to help them both to work together. Until Sam decides that Harry cannot change, he should presume that "equal opportunity" means that in the long run we *have* to get along by race and sex and that each good example breeds the next.

If Harry turns out to be in really bad shape, Sam must remember that it is not legal to retain a supervisor so racist or sexist that he could not place a black or woman with him. If Harry's sexism has deep emotional roots, Harry may need clinical help and Sam may need to support him to get it. Of course, Sam may need some support himself. He should probably keep his top management informed of his EEO concerns and seek their advice. And if Sam comes in for advice, his supervisor should commend Sam for seeking counsel with his problem. As the responses from some readers illustrate, Sam is an easy scapegoat for anger, when much of the actual source of anger is tension about changing sex roles.

### Learning from readers' responses

What can managers learn from the respondents' opinions? One point of relevance to top management is that different managers will react to these cases in extremely diverse ways. If a company wants to have a reasonably well-integrated policy in this arena, management will have to work hard for it.

If the respondents to this case are at all representative, many U.S. managers are becoming aware of subtle equal opportunity problems, and many are committed to solve them through creative personnel management. However, the respondents were much more sophisticated with respect to outside training programs and consultants than with respect to direct fostering of assertiveness in women. Fostering assertiveness may then be an important subject for top managers to discuss among themselves with an eye toward forming company policy in this area. If top management is committed to



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equal opportunity, it will insist that support for women and minority employees come directly from line managers, not just from consultants.

Do male and female managers' responses we received vary with respect to this case concerning a woman? There are apparent differences, but it is hard to tell from these data whether they represent systematic differences in management style. Men appear to have identified mainly with Sam, women with both Gwen and Sam, which makes sense because of the story. This fact may explain the women's greater interest in analyzing the past and in the much longer responses they sent in.

Women also appear to have experienced the whole case as more painful. This might help to explain why fewer women responded. More women may want just to deny or forget the problem. But those who did answer might have had good reason to want to work out some particular part of the case (including the occasional woman who felt "Gwen should just go").

Several hypotheses could be put forward about the overall significance

in the differences between male and female responses, but they need judicious consideration.

It may be that in general men are more willing to stereotype people—or it may be true in this case only because the subject appeared to be sexism.

Similarly, women may be more likely to analyze behavior—but they may also be more prone to stereotype *men* in a reverse-sexist situation. It is interesting that male respondents were less likely to assign blame and more likely just to "get on with it." Again we do not know if women managers systematically blame more, or only in cases so close to home.

The male respondents were more likely to imagine Sam could solve the problem just by ordering Harry to change. More women imagined that Sam, Gwen, and outside helpers need to address the problem in some depth. Perhaps this difference reflects a male delusion of power, or an unwillingness to deal with the emotional complexities of the case. Or perhaps it simply reflects the different experiences men and women have had in dealing with male-female situations and their different perception of likely outcomes to Gwen's and Harry's conflict.

That is, male managers may correctly perceive that many men like Harry will change their overt behavior if Sam takes a hard enough line. Female managers may correctly perceive that Gwen will also have to deal with Harry's real feelings as well as his overt behavior, and that Gwen and Sam need all the outside help they can get because it takes so long to change feelings and attitudes.

Men were more likely to feel that Gwen and Harry would have to be separated. Perhaps men feel this way because they have not had as much experience in *having* to get along with women colleagues in work situations. Women (especially HBR readers) have had a great deal of experience in having to get along with male colleagues. And they know at a personal level that it can and needs to be done.

More female than male respondents found fault with the way Gwen handled the situation. Perhaps more

men find Gwen's behavior "normal"; possibly fewer of them see that Gwen should have handled Harry directly. Or it could be that many more women than men expect women to be perfect superwomen, able to handle every situation, including harassment, on their own. Perhaps they simply believe Gwen will *have* to be a superwoman, in order to succeed in our unequal environment.

Perhaps the major point to be learned from the readers is how much support middle managers actually need in dealing with these new personnel questions. Many are still very unsure how they will be expected to react to the real-life situations they face.

Company presidents and chief executives should, therefore, be sure that commitment to equal opportunity is explicit, frequently voiced, and frequently discussed when managers are evaluated. They should make sure that their managers have all the resources they need, such as in-house and out-of-house training programs, films, skits, and workshops. A chief executive can do much to support responsible minority and women's networks (joining them for lunch, offering a small budget to help them with recruitment, helping to sponsor an outside speaker, seeking their representation and advice on committees, and so forth).

Finally, top management should exemplify the mentorship role with blacks and women. And it should review, strengthen, and support procedures that are obviously important to equal opportunity (such as the grievance procedure and posting systems). But most of all, top management should support its managers as they step off into a new world. They need counsel if they blunder and praise and a bonus if they do well.