

Is there a Right to Be Addressed as One Wishes to Be Addressed?

A Teaching Case to offer ideas about conflicts involving titles, pronouns, birth names, chosen names, dead names, adoption names, nicknames, and names before and after marriage and divorce

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About this teaching case: This 1973 teaching case was originally offered for discussion at a Corporate Ombudsmen Conference workshop in 1984; I retrieved it from my archives. While the specific details of this case are dated, the larger social identity issues represented by the case are poignantly relevant today.

It may be easier to analyze an illustrative old case than a current case, as we seek to understand social identities and impartiality. This teaching case offers ideas to consider for anyone who may be asked for help with social identity conflicts.

The issues: The original story was about *titles* used or not used by women. Now we also have many conflicts about *pronouns* used or not used by individuals, as well as names given at birth, chosen names, “dead names,” adoption names, nicknames, names before and after marriage and divorce—in the US and in many other countries. Some of these conflicts become seriously disruptive and painful, as other people—sometimes many people—become involved.

This case presents the timeless issue of two people who are each complaining about the other. Each complainant is disruptively bullying and threatening the other—with many witnesses. And this case may (as so many cases do, today) include a core issue of a government regulation—about the titles people are permitted to use for themselves.

Here there is an issue of perceived sexism and how a person is to be addressed. In a different case, there might be names related to xenophobia, racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, ageism, homophobia, or other sources of insult, ridicule, repudiation, rejection, and shunning.

Ideas to Consider: Keeping in mind contemporary cases that involve the use of pronouns, names, and titles (and even epithets used as names), an ombuds (or manager) who deals with such a case might wish to do a detailed analysis—or, at least, a *quick scan* of the following standard questions:

- 1) Is this now an emergency? (If not, what factors or events would make this an emergency?)
- 2) Whose interests (including those of the employer) are at stake? Make a list of all the stakeholders.
- 3) What are the interests of each stakeholder?
- 4) What are the sources of power of each stakeholder?
- 5) What are the *unconstructive* and *constructive* options open to each stakeholder?
- 6) Which rules, regulations, laws—and norms or principles—are relevant?
- 7) What resources are available to help with the various concerns?
- 8) With whom might the manager or ombuds wish to talk, and, if so, why? Would they need permission to talk?
- 9) What options might be offered to each of these complainants, individually—or in a systems approach that includes management?

Whether and when “people have a right to be addressed as they wish to be addressed” is a question precisely derived from our social identities. For this reason, when considering this case, one might pay special attention to the *emotional* interests of each of the protagonists and whether they care at all about their relationship with each other. Sometimes an appeal to an important relationship may save the day.

In their book *Beyond Reason: Using Emotions as You Negotiate*, Roger Fisher and Daniel Shapiro¹ outline five basic emotional concerns: appreciation, affiliation, autonomy, status in the situation, and role in the situation. In the following case, the two protagonists will likely have every one of these concerns for themselves. Each of these concerns may be important in any case about social identities, and each of these may provide a platform for the ombuds or manager to find a good resolution to the conflict, if other considerations (like the law or regulations) do not decide the matter.

Is there a Right to be Addressed as One Wishes to be Addressed?

Originally presented at the 1984 Corporate Ombudsman Conference
(Details were changed from the real 1973 incident.)

"This company won't let me buy savings bonds! If you don't fire that payroll manager, I'll write a letter to *The New York Times* about the lack of patriotism here. This is why this country is taking a back seat in the world. My husband fought in WWII, and, by God, I'll buy savings bonds if I want to!"

A fiery lady bursts into your office. This isn't a good time for an interruption. In fifteen minutes, you are due to appear before the Employee Handbook Revision Committee. This is their fourth meeting to consider a rewrite of the flexible hours policy you proposed. You are the last person invited in to talk with the Committee. (They had not originally invited you but rectified their oversight due to your exceptionally astute remarks to the Committee Chair.) But your fiery visitor regains your attention, shouting: "You let me buy savings bonds or I'll make sure you regret ever having met me!"

Yes indeed.

You call the payroll manager—not with the lady's permission exactly, more at her fierce demand. "Is there some reason why Josephine Trueblood isn't being permitted to buy savings bonds?"

The voice on the telephone is so loud that it hurts your ear: "If she comes back to this office, I will quit. She refuses to abide by government regulations, and her shouting upset only about twenty of my people. Get rid of her. She's completely crazy."

"Josephine Trueblood, is it true that you have somehow refused to comply with government regulations?" you ask, completely baffled, looking at this woman, who appears to be near retirement age.

Trueblood roars at you, "I wouldn't sign that form, if you..." She catches her breath. "And neither should any other woman in this country. I'm going to go back to that sexist pig and let him have it!" She stalks out, still shouting, and slams the door.

Quickly you turn back to the payroll manager. "Could you let me know how Trueblood is refusing to comply with government regulations? The manager explains to you, very angrily, that to buy savings bonds, you *must* sign your name, and indicate: "Mr., Miss, or Mrs."

Josephine Trueblood has insisted on "Ms." Or "nothing!" and said she would take the manager to court for sex discrimination.

The manager says he knows his regulations and he isn't going to let another "militant libber" cause the country any more damage. He adds: "If our boss hadn't started hiring women, this kind of problem would never have happened. For God's sake, get rid of her and let an honest man get some work done. Fire her. She's truly disrupting the whole department!"

Over the phone line, you can tell, before the line goes dead, that Trueblood has indeed returned to disrupt the payroll department in a major way, as others begin to take sides.

Quickly, you decide to....

¹ Roger Fisher and Daniel Shapiro, *Beyond Reason: Using Emotions as You Negotiate* (New York, NY: Viking Penguin, 2005).