

# Subtleties in the Workplace Revisited

BY EILEEN L. BERMAN



## In the March/April edition,

I discussed the improved but still difficult role of women in the workplace. I referenced Sen. Hillary Clinton's primary battle as an example of some of the inequities women face. While I specifically stated that the article was "not about politics" but rather about women in the workplace and the resultant difficulties they may face in achieving parity in their chosen profession, many readers chose to focus on the political aspect.

Most women felt understood and vindicated as they related to many of their own difficulties in the work world. Some readers, however, picked up the political thread of Clinton and felt it was not an accurate portrayal of the workplace. One reader chastised women for "complaining" and suggested that they should not stand around and wait for someone else to do something about it. Another commented that women should "stop whining and do something" if they feel life is so unfair. Was this the message readers took away from this article?

History tells us that women have been fighting the battle for change since they "won" the right to vote. What event could be more representative of self-responsibility and courage than this one defining moment in our history? To my mind, the challenge of obtaining voting rights does not indicate sitting passively by and waiting for others to clear the path for us. The fact that Clinton could run for president would be indication of women having the courage to embark on a path that would have been seen as impossible and foolhardy just a generation ago.

Regardless of the proactive stance of women and minorities, however, it is extremely difficult to buck entrenched attitudes that shape and enable cultures to continue promoting their long-held views. Sometimes these values are expressed subtly and sometimes quite blatantly. Either way, these beliefs prevent true progress from being made in allowing everyone to be treated fairly based on their knowledge and experience.

Maltreatment occurs not because we allow it to happen, but because of an entrenched culture that surrounds us. As history proves, women have not accepted the status of second-class citizens either in the workplace or in the broader arena; they have been fighting for fair pay and equal opportunity for a very long time. In fact, they entered the workplace when it was extremely difficult for women to break through the traditional male bastion that it was. Has it had a positive effect? Absolutely. There are now women who run corporations and major universities, an unheard of achievement just a generation ago. To top it all off, a woman has run for president and acquitted herself quite well in the process, regardless of alleged bias.

Are there still disparities between the genders in terms of fair and equal treatment? Absolutely. For many women, no matter how many times they address workplace issues that devalue them and undermine their efforts, they fight a losing battle because of the culture that is in place. But as history teaches, it takes time and continuing determination and action to change the status quo.

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These themes of subtleties in the workplace apply to any disenfranchised group. Regardless of the lingering racial and gender prejudice, however, we have come very far as a nation. Note the faces of the primary election season. Can we individually and collectively break through our traditional ways of viewing people and begin to evaluate those around us for their intelligence, talent and abilities, whether it be in a business, a social gathering or a political contest?

Clinton served as an example to everyone (not only women) that the improbable is possible. Hopefully, this shared experience will help each of us go beyond the externals in making decisions in the workplace and in our lives as a whole.

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