Ma Bell's dark past

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Special to The National Law Journal
The National Law Journal and National Law Journal Online
10-25-2004

During a psychology lecture in college, the professor discussed stereotypes, arguing they were not inherently evil, but simply mental shortcuts that we all use instinctively because our brains cannot process everything we come in contact with. Those shortcuts become troublesome, he explained, only when we act on them blindly, without allowing the real person to show us that our shortcut was wrong.

I thought of this while reading The Bell Women, by Marjorie A. Stockford (Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, N.J. 2004), a story of corporate stereotyping run amok, which provides an example of what can happen when people rely on unexamined stereotypes.

The book is a vivid re-telling of the story of the landmark AT&T Corp. sex discrimination case. In the fall of 1970, a young Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) lawyer conceived of a simple, yet brilliant plan: to try to force AT&T to stop discriminating against its employees by preventing AT&T from raising its phone rates until it stopped discriminating. In the early 1970s, AT&T held sway with a complete monopoly on telephone services: placing calls, renting phones, talking to operators. AT&T was regulated by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) alone. When AT&T requested a rate increase, the EEOC opposed it, citing systemic sexual and racial discrimination against AT&T employees. The FCC ordered public hearings on AT&T's employment practices in 1971.

After numerous hearings—airing AT&T's dirty laundry—held throughout the country, along with plenty of negotiating, grandstanding, other governmental intervention and back-door dealings, the two sides brokered a settlement in early 1973. AT&T and the EEOC entered into a binding consent decree that included a commitment to affirmative action, timetables for hiring women and minorities, and back pay.

To her credit, Stockford delves into the motivations of the various participants in the case without painting any of them with the hero's brush. She praises them when they deserve it, but she does not smooth over things or canonize them. David Copus, for example, a young EEOC lawyer and the person credited with devising the idea of petitioning to hold up AT&T's requested rate increase, would have been the easiest person to cast as the hero of the story. But Stockford goes to great lengths to show him as he actually was: equal parts firebrand, cocky, idealistic and relatively inexperienced. Each of the female employees discussed by Stockford is given a rich background description of their individual hopes and dreams. From the beginning of the FCC hearings, AT&T (while vigorously defending itself), also began re-evaluating its assumptions about and policies toward women and minorities in an effort to improve its employment practices.

A nuanced story

Stockford's tale sheds light on the institutional discrimination that had become prevalent at AT&T, among many other companies. Prior to this case, women and minorities were often forced into lower paying jobs. But Stockford explains that this forcing was often done without malicious intent. "That is the way it was always done" was the popular corporate refrain. AT&T's leaders felt that women and minorities wanted these types of jobs. This institutional discrimination—a feeling that nothing was wrong with forcing certain people toward certain jobs and away from others—drove AT&T's culture and that of many other companies at the time.

For example, Stockford describes the shock of the AT&T executives when they first saw the EEOC's petition. They could not believe people had problems with their employment practices. It was this feeling that needed to be changed. And luckily AT&T's executives had the mental flexibility, once forced to see these problems, that allowed them to fix them. The effects of the case were tremendous. AT&T was never the same: After the settlement, women made tremendous progress in obtaining semi-skilled craft jobs—that is, the higher paying positions once reserved for men. Moreover, women have seen an increase in management-level positions and above.

This heightened corporate awareness, courtesy of the AT&T settlement, created tangible results outside of AT&T as well. In the four years following AT&T's consent decree, nearly a dozen suits were settled between the federal government and some of the country's highest-profile companies, including Delta Air Lines, Merrill Lynch, Prudential Insurance and NBC, according to Stockford. Success at advancing women and minorities became an important statistic upon which companies would be and are continued to be judged today. In the end, the consent decree led to the upending of the institutional discrimination AT&T had perpetrated and its influence on American culture, writes Stockford.
The scenario described in The Bell Women is a perfect and yet deeply troubling example of what can happen when people stop using stereotypes as mere memory shortcuts and instead rely on them exclusively in order to act, without allowing for any mental flexibility. The situation at AT&T before the suit was rife with people not only using stereotypes, but openly relying on them to the detriment of others. It took the class action to force people to abandon their use of stereotypes and to regard others as individuals.

In a time when some bemoan an overly sensitive workplace, rife with anti-discrimination rules and concerns, we would do well to remember the women of AT&T and the early path they forged.

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