

## OTHERISM: BEING FEMALE IN A (STILL) MALE ENGINEERING WORLD

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Everyone here is connected to engineering, one way or another. Since an engineering mind is a problem-solving mind, let's tackle the problems of stereotyping as we would those of any project, say a power transformer, a new building, a kitchen cabinet—I've done all those. They each require the same mind-set.

Let us imagine a week in which I am interviewing engineers for a new project. Over a long working lifetime, I've hired a fair number—and fired a few. Using normal engineering practice, let's assume a worst case, that my brain is stuffed with prejudice—with stereotypes, dogmatic bigotry, blindsided provincialism—trivial and disastrous. Let's listen in on the interior monologue of a worst-case employer, and then design some solutions.

"Why did HR send me that girl in the wheel chair yesterday? I don't care what they say, everyone knows they're out sick a lot.

"And the fat one—obese is the word—a sure sign of lack of discipline. And the one with gray hair—doesn't she have the sense to dye it, for heaven's sake?! I need people on the cutting edge, thinking outside the box, not old stick-in-the-muds. Not only that, she'll retire in a few years and wreck the pension system.

"Even though she's blonde, I liked that young engineer from MIT. Truly sharp. But she just got engaged. She'll be pregnant very soon and need time off, and where will that leave me? There goes my budget....The Chinese lady this morning, or was she Korean? Her eyelids really do fold in the corner, and she speaks English weirdly. Is it true that all Orientals are strong in math and very loyal? But who can understand her?

"And *two* black women! I'm willing to bet they're the only two in the entire state. Well, we've filled our quota here with janitors. Will I ever forget Miss O'Leary. Uh, O'Flattery. O'Malley. Whatever. Wearing that huge gold cross, for God's sake, like she's better than the rest of us. I'm not saying every Irishman is a big drinker, but the last thing I need is a drunk around here.

"Those two who came together—I know their CEO and he says they both do great work. But one of them, the muscular one, wore a brass lion pin, and said she was a Leo, a natural leader. This is an engineering mind? The other, the fidgeter, wore a peculiar

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cologne—I hate perfume in the office—and one tiny gold earring in her left ear. That means something. I don't like it—everything today is Morse code.”

### What is prejudice?

Let's define a prejudicial viewpoint as one in which someone discriminates against you because they have made up their mind about you without knowing you. Thus, the above list could go on forever. I've heard every one of these remarks—and many others—with my own ears, not always about myself, sometimes from women, often about men. You could all make your own list.

Sometimes, gender is the least of it. Being the youngest in my early years and now the oldest, *and* short, *and* Jewish, *and* very myopic, *and* freckled, *and* from a hick town in New Hampshire, *and* politically liberal, *and* without a college degree, I am a wide band target.

Luckily, I have had the good sense to know that put-down attitudes have nothing to do with me, so I am bullet proof. In my mind, there rests the certainty that if you really knew me, you'd be glad to have me around. I had learned Eleanor Roosevelt's dictum: Nobody can humiliate you without your permission.

Where did the lessons come from? Probably from my experiences in World War II. I had come of age during a tiny slot of time when millions of men had gone to war and the factories were desperate for help, rather like today's hot dot.com companies. “Build the Planes! Build the Tanks!” cried Uncle Sam in the wartime posters, fist in the air. Nobody ever said to me, “Girls can't do welding, girls can't do riveting, girls can't do engineering.” When the war was over and these remarks surfaced, it was too late to tell me.

For every major category of prejudice there are specific names: racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, ageism, chauvinism, class hatred, and so on. My argument here is that each is an example of a single phenomenon that we might call *otherism*, the state of being different from the norm around you. It doesn't matter how you are different. Of course, some categories can cause far more harm than others, in the same way that, although all gasses have the same characteristics, radon is radioactive. You may be the best first basemen in the minor leagues, but you are black and all the players in the majors are white. You may be the best engineer in the company, with the best people skills, but you are also the only female in the department, and how can they make you the manager?

## CAUSES

For me, the basis of otherism is our primitive mammalian nature. Everyone different from us is suspect. In many primitive languages, the word for *stranger* is the same as the word for *enemy*. One must be wary for good reason—the stranger often was the enemy, burning your village, stealing your children. The tribe was the only reliable defense unit. Thus, it is entirely natural, comfortable, and not unexpected that each of us says, viscerally, “Why can’t you be more like I am, perfect in every way?” Prejudice always feels right to the originators.

## SOME SOLUTIONS

- **Make yourself less of a stranger**

You will then be less of an enemy. Salespeople, by definition, are superb at this. Learn from them. They can in, cold calling, and close the sale with strangers. They are geniuses at making everyone around them comfortable. No one is a stranger for long around them. They reduce tension—they know a joke for every situation. They seldom contradict the customer. They know how to turn around anger and fear. Learn from them.

(This strategy is of no use in extreme cases, as when you are caught in the crossfire of your Serbian neighbors who suddenly hate you.)

- **Take advantage of today’s full employment**

Good times solve many difficulties. In many business sectors today, it’s just like wartime. Everyone wants you, even when you are tattooed and wearing a nose ring. Managers are now judged—of all enlightened yardsticks—on retention rates. They may object to a snake winding up your arm, but they’d better not disparage it or you may leave for the competitor.

- **Refine your demeanor.**

Act like you are bullet proof and very few will take pot shots. The best strategy I know is this one: Say yes before you say no.

The other week someone (without my best interests at heart) said, “Ethel, you are condescending.”

I nodded. “It’s one of my worse defects. I’m working on it. Any suggestions?” I’ve agreed with him. That pulls out all fangs. What can Mr. Nasty say next?

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He might have said, “You’re too bossy/too saccharine/too controlling/too Miss Pollyanna, too....” Same response.

Try it. Sweet talk is almost always more effective than sour talk.

Poor responses: “I am *not*!” “Nobody but you says that.” “Go soak your @#!# head!” “Everyone says I have more tact than anyone in the section.”

Denial doesn’t work. Reason doesn’t work. Reason did not put their head where it is, so reason will not get it out. Anger never works. Anger trumps reason and everything else.

- **Have a store of snappy answers.**

You need them. Everyone does, men as well. Deliver them with a smile. You’re out to win friends, and honey generally works better than vinegar. We’ll be talking about effective responses to remarks like **“The men won’t work for a woman.”**

- **Dress for success. Be aware of Morse Code**

Everything really is Morse code. Wear a see-through blouse in an engineering department, and the message is loud and clear.

If only our species spawned once a year, like whales in the Baja. We could close down the company for three weeks, breed gleefully, then return to work, unfettered for the rest of the year. Instead, we humans are all in heat, all the time.

The men have got it right: They wear a uniform, a dark suit, perhaps jeans or chinos, every male looking more or less alike, virile hairy chests concealed, rippling muscles hidden. What shows in the attentive or stoic face, emphasis on brainpower. They are dressed for success.

We women tend to get it wrong. We’ll talk about what to wear as a female member of a species, always in estrus.

- **Attend to Old Boy Networks.**

We’ll talk about ways to deal with partying, golfing, ballgames, and such, so you won’t miss out on important decisions and assignments.

- **Use the law.**

Some of these discriminations are illegal. The law doesn’t say we must love one another, only that we must play fair in certain categories. If you can’t get hired in the first place, none of these negotiating skills will matter.

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- **Leave.**

There are many rotten managers. Get out of their clutches. We'll talk about when and how. (How they rose to these positions is the subject of another conference.)

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