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Sex in the Executive Suite

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Sex in the executive suite

I DON'T know whether Price Waterhouse unjustly denied Ann Hopkins a partnership in the firm. Neither does the Supreme Court. Hopkins, a 1965 graduate of Hollins College, claims the accounting firm denied her the partnership because she acted too much like a man. The Supreme Court sent the case back to the lower courts with this guideline: Price Waterhouse must show by a preponderance of the evidence that sex discrimination was not a factor in its decision to deny her the partnership.

That's a fair enough conclusion. Women form a minority in economic power centers, and they're entitled to have the odds evened. What may be harder to determine is the extent to which different criteria applied to different sexes should constitute illegal discrimination.

We're all familiar with the argument that, for some jobs, the male's superior physical strength and ability to resist external forces gives him a legitimate advantage. You wouldn't give a 100-pound woman a job lifting 150-pound bales. But that argument is increasingly irrelevant. A 100-pound woman may be able to operate a forklift as ably as a 300-pound man. And if a muscular 200-pound woman can lift 150-pound bales manually, why deny her the opportunity?

But Ann Hopkins' case was different. No one denied that she was good at accounting; her clients gave her high marks. Price Waterhouse contended that her problem was one of personality: She was sometimes overly aggressive, harsh, demanding and impatient with her staff. These are generally thought of as macho characteristics. Would it have made a difference had she been a man?

One partner, who supported Hopkins for the promotion, remarked that she would stand a better chance of advancement if she would "walk more femininely, talk more femininely, dress more femininely, wear makeup, have her hair styled and wear jewelry." For Ann Hopkins, it may be more difficult for women to move into executive roles and maintain their femininity, because the model executive has always been portrayed as masculine. The challenge of the women in the executive tower is not to conform to the male executive stereotype but to forge an attractive female executive image. You don't have to walk seductively to walk femininely, you don't have to flash thigh and cleavage to dress femininely. You don't have to purr like a kitten to talk femininely. On the other hand, you don't have to be aggressive, harsh, demanding and impatient to be a good executive.

But in my opinion, if you're a woman, you'll make a better executive if you walk, talk and dress in a feminine way. If you're a man, you'll make a better executive if you walk, talk and dress in a masculine way.

We shouldn't have to go the unisex route to achieve sexual equality in the business world, I may be old-fashioned, but I still like to deal with women who are confident in their femininity and men who are confident in their masculinity. If I'm conducting business with you, I don't care whether you wear a Liz Claiborne dress or a Brooks Brothers suit. But I do prefer that the person in the Liz Claiborne be a woman and the person in the Brooks Brothers be a man.