

# From Glass to Steel

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A new century, a new ceiling

**BUSI 2101E – Group 6**

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Throughout history, women have struggled to be recognized as equals in the workplace. The 'glass ceiling' of the corporate world has often kept women from pursuing careers as executives in business. Today we find a new type of ceiling and it is made of steel. Women are fighting to gain recognition and respect as capable employees in male-dominated trades. When the workplace has a large disparity in gender distribution, the topic of gender-based conflict and harassment must be addressed and looked at through a critical microscope. In professions such as welding, there is little to no history of women in the workplace. Only in the past few decades has there been a small influx of female workers. In the transportation, trades and construction fields combined, only 6% of workers are female (Ferraio, 2010). In our case study we meet Ms. M, an apprentice, who tells us of her experience as a female pioneer in the welding trade. We will discuss the harassment she has endured by looking at how this impacts motivation, communication, the politics and the rules of the organization and its employees, while providing suggestions for resolving similar cases.

Ms. M works as a welder-fabricator for a company that builds custom emergency vehicles and oil trucks. She has worked there for over a year, where she continues her apprenticeship. This is not her first position as a welder; she has over three years of experience in this trade. Her basic duties involve cutting, building and welding the parts of the trucks until they are ready to be painted and sent out to the client. Her specialty is in TIG welding which involves using a torch, electrical current and a rod. Although she must adhere to strict safety and industry standards, she has some flexibility in how she accomplishes her job (Ms. M, personal communication, Feb 15, 2013).

The organization where Ms. M works has a parent company and a subsidiary just outside of Ottawa. Each location employs 20-30 people in total as assemblers, welders, electricians, sales, parts, designers, engineers, supervisors and administrators. The owner divides his time between sites. We will focus on the local company where Ms. M works. She is the only female employee on the floor. Since January 2013, she is subordinate to a supervisor, a foreman, the general manager (GM) and the owner. Prior to January, the only authorities were the supervisor and the owner (Ms. M, personal communication, Feb 15, 2013).

Ms. M believes that welding is a new industry for women to establish themselves in, unlike other trades such as electrical and carpentry where women have been working for decades. She describes herself as a pioneer, forging the way for other women to enter the welding trade. As she elaborates, this is a physically demanding job. It is hot, there are safety concerns and, as she puts it, 'it's not dainty'. Entering this field, she has had to work twice as hard to show others that she is valuable. She arrives at work first and leaves last. She follows the rules and keeps a smile on her face. She feels like she is being scrutinized, that they are waiting for her to fail (Ms. M, personal communication, Feb 15, 2013).

When a woman enters this field, it can be threatening for the men, some of whom react badly. One in particular, Mr. X, has been a problem for Ms. M. She explains that Mr. X, her equal in pay and experience, has been making her uncomfortable since she started in January 2012. She describes his attitude towards women as 'backwoods' or 'redneck'. He has used sexist and vulgar language in a way that goes beyond what is normal and accepted in this workplace. He has attacked her work, personality, looks, abilities and intelligence. He has told her that

women do not belong in the industry. He does not treat their male colleagues like this (Ms. M, personal communication, Feb 15, 2013).

From the perspective of Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory, there are three hygiene factors that have created job dissatisfaction for Ms. M, and they are: relationship with peers, relationship with supervisor, and company policy and administration (Herzberg, Mausner & Snyderman, 1959). We first explore the relationship with peers. Compounding the problem, she explains, there is no political correctness on the floor, where the men regularly use rude, crude and racist language with each other. This behaviour is tolerated and even accepted by the employees. Ms. M admits to being comfortable with risqué humour and describes herself as easy going. She feels that she is treated like one of the guys, an attitude with which she is generally comfortable. She describes feelings of insecurity only when it comes to being confronted about her performance. This is where she feels that women are unlike from men and that she needs to be critiqued differently. Ms. M adds that there are three more victims of harassment. She speaks of a fellow from the Congo, who is constantly being called racist names. A man with Tourette syndrome is called 'retard'; he laughs because he does not really understand that they are being mean to him. The third man who, despite being heterosexual, is called gay and other homophobic slurs. She states that, in this case, he does not take it personally. This is the environment in which she works (Ms. M, personal communication, Feb 15, 2013).

Communication is the process by which a message is transferred, received and then interpreted by individuals through one or more channels. Good communication is crucial for the functionality and success of organizations; however, many people lack the skills to communicate effectively. This case is a classic example of what happens in a work-group, where failure to use

effective communication results in conflict (Langton, 2013). Prior to the GM and Foreman positions being added, the first incident was brought to the owner's attention in September 2012, after nine months of Ms. M dealing with Mr. X's attitude. She finally stood up for herself and he decided to report her to the owner and supervisor. They were both called into the office and, in the end, Mr. X was given a final warning. On the surface everything seemed fine, but in reality Mr. X continued to talk about Ms. M to their coworkers and say things under his breath to her. Because of this, she started to dislike coming into work. She internalized her feelings and this affected her attendance. This went on until a second incident occurred in January 2013, shortly after the GM was hired (Ms. M, personal communication, Feb 15, 2013).

The flow of communication within an organization occurs horizontally and vertically. Lateral communication happens between individuals at the same level; the implications being that actions can be taken without the knowledge of members at levels above or below. Upward communication is the flow of communication to higher levels, particularly from employees to managers, often providing managers with feedback on the behaviour and satisfaction of employees. Downward communication flows from managers to employees; decisions and actions must be clearly stated, defined and shared by the manager (Langton, 2013). In Ms. M's case, all directions of communication within the organization are severely lacking.

In the second reported incident, Mr. X was criticizing Ms. M's work to a colleague, which she could hear from across the shop floor. She told Mr. X to tell her directly if he had something to say about her. He reacted badly and stormed away. He tried to come back to Ms. M and she told him she did not want conflict with him, to leave her be and go talk to someone else. Shortly after, another colleague (the future foreman) asked Ms. M what had happened to get Mr.

X so upset. She explained the situation in a matter of fact way without knowing that Mr. X was nearby and overheard everything she said. Mr. X reported this to the GM and Ms. M was called to the office. With both her supervisor and Mr. X present, the GM told her that he was dealing with today's issue only, not their history, and that she had to be more accommodating to Mr. X and be less sensitive. The GM accused Ms. M of gossiping. She counterpointed that Mr. X had started the incident in the same way. The GM confirmed this with Mr. X and the entire issue was dropped. Ms. M was never given an opportunity to privately tell her side of the issue. She later addressed this with her supervisor but was never given a follow up conversation or an apology. The GM ignored her for days following the incident; she worried her job was no longer secure (Ms. M, personal communication, Feb 15, 2013). Improvement of the directional flow of communication within the organization would have benefited all parties (Langton, 2013).

As another example of Herzberg's hygiene factors, here we see the relationship with supervisor (1959). Ms. M adds that she had been having ongoing conversations with her supervisor about Mr. X and that her supervisor did not take her complaints to the owner because of his own need and desire to continue to be 'one of the guys.' She acknowledges that she herself should have reported Mr. X to the owner earlier. However, her status as the only female in an all-male environment made her feel that she should try to fit in and not cause drama. As per McClelland's needs theory, Ms. M's need for power is evident in the fact that she wants to see changes in her workplace, and existing policies enforced, but this conflicts with her need for affiliation. The stabilizing factor is her need for achievement, that despite the negative aspects of her situation, she wants to work hard and keep her job (1961) (Ms. M, personal communication, Feb 15, 2013).

Herzberg's final hygiene factor applied is company policy and administration (1959).

When asked if Ms. M feels the incidents were handled properly, she states that the first incident was better handled than the latter. A behaviour policy was distributed shortly after the first incident, which clearly outlines the consequences of unacceptable behaviour. She says that these policies were ignored in the second incident. The new GM did not act according to the previous decision or to the standards set in place. When asked what she feels would have happened had these policies been followed, she declares that Mr. X would have been dismissed; he was told in September that this was his final chance. Although she admits that her work environment would be better without Mr. X, she embraces the experience this has given her to deal with poor work situations (Ms. M, personal communication, Feb 15, 2013).

If we apply Adams' equity theory to this situation, Ms. M feels that she is being treated unfairly. The unfairness that she perceives can be explained from the standpoint of organizational justice, using the dimensions of distributive, procedural and interactional justice. Ms. M feels that procedural justice was not served. During the January incident, the process did not allow her to have what she called a "safe platform" with the manager. Mr. X was present during Ms. M's entire meeting with the supervisors, interrupting several times to call her a liar and other names. Interactional justice is exemplified in the poor treatment that Ms. M received. She felt her superiors were condescending, sexist and dismissive, as her complaints were attributed to moods and emotionality, not fact or reality. Distributive justice is the main issue since, in Ms. M's view, justice was not distributed at all. The new standards were not upheld nor did the GM adhere to the expected consequences as outlined in the previous incident (Adams, 1965; Latham & Pinder, 2005). A previous workplace was able to implement zero tolerance for

harassment, and the atmosphere in that company felt accepting of non-traditional workers.

The harassment Ms. M received from Mr. X threatened her sense of competence. Management could help motivate employees toward increased performance and a healthy work environment by reinforcing positive behaviour and encouraging employees to behave appropriately. Ms. M saw workers experience harassment based on gender, race, and even physical characteristics. Three types of reinforcement to consider in this situation are extinction, negative reinforcement and punishment. Extinction, not rewarding or acknowledging certain behavior, can help. This is accomplished by not responding with laughs or encouragement when someone is being harassed. Behaviour can be monitored by having supervisors as a constant presence to workers. Research shows that random-interval observation can build moderate to high performance, of the desired behavioural standards, because the anticipation of impromptu surveillance leads to extinction. Negative reinforcement, the removal of undesirable stimulus as a reward for compliance, would be accomplished with the dismissal of offenders. Punishment, the application of negative outcomes for nonconformity, could also be implemented (Luthans & Kreitner, 1985).

Male-dominated professions have the tendency to become what is colloquially known as 'boys' clubs', the implication being that they feel it is only a man's job, and that women will cause conflict. Ms. M's company policy, an escalating schedule of consequences for negative behaviour, includes verbal and written warnings, suspension and dismissal (Appendix B). The structure is outlined, but needs to be consistently applied. All existing employees should attend annual harassment training, signing documentation stating their understanding and commitment to compliance. Employees must be assured that any report will be investigated, and treated as



confidential, with no repercussions to them. In the case of severe infractions, including reports of harassment, incidents should be handled according to the set procedures. The Human Rights Commission of Ontario has rules in place that are intended to cover and provide provisions for all instances of harassment, including those based on gender. If a workplace has more than six workers, they must have a visible policy in place, and it must cover all forms of harassment: sexual, gender-based, racial, or otherwise. In addition to a visible harassment policy, they are required by law to have a plan in place to deal with any potential breaches (Bill 168, 2009).

Women face a vast number of challenges in attempting to enter the trades. The attitudes of people in the work environment, and society at large, discourage women from entering male-centric professions. Not only do women have to conquer societal expectations, they must also be prepared for the potentially negative and hostile attitudes of coworkers. They may feel their work is more closely scrutinized with more emphasis placed on the mistakes they make. It is up to the owners and managers of the companies involved to foster an environment that is inclusive and accepting of female workers. The glass ceiling was perceived as penetrable because women were already in the working environment. They had access to companies in the corporate world and the career training necessary for advancement. The steel ceiling is more difficult to break through; it is still uncommon to find female workers at any position in industry. With no pre-existing foothold for women, can female welders, such as Ms. M, truly be accepted in the trades?

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