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Breaking the Barriers: Cases of Racial Discrimination in Public Management

Robert Gest III
Federal Executive Institute
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Session presenters discuss six cases of racial and gender discrimination in the civil service, distilled from actual events, in search of applied lessons for improving managing diversity.

In theory, federal agencies should not allow discriminatory practices. As classical bureaucracies, government organizations should base employee selection, compensation, treatment and promotion on objective "merit" criteria as defined and developed by federal personnel authorities. In fact, through American history government organizations have often flouted merit rules to discount the contributions of ethnic minorities, as Desmond King shows in "Separate and Unequal: Black Americans and the United States Federal Government" (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Ellis Cose, Feagin and Sikes, and others have chronicled racism in everyday life, but there is relatively little treatment of the minority experience within the U.S. civil service. We will begin to fill this void by compiling six cases suitable for the classroom use, based on the actual experiences of federal managers. These cases are meant as teaching tools useful for both scholars and practitioners. Three of the cases have already been developed, and we will develop three more by the time of presentation. The cases will explore:

1. Incidents in which employees are not sure whether or not they are being targeted because of race. Two cases will explore various ways in which employees cope with such situations, including using the exit option.
2. The difficulties faced when an agency resembles a plantation, with overwhelmingly white professional staffs and overwhelmingly African American clerical staffs.
3. The difficulties faced by a new manager attempting to reform a work place which has separate tracks segregated by ethnicity, in accord with longstanding local customs, employee speech patterns.

We propose not to present a paper as such. Rather, we will present the cases, and seek reactions of the audience.

PRESENTERS:

Robert Gest III has been a senior faculty member at the Federal Executive Institute since 1993, following a 33-year career in state and national government. He is currently the deputy director of the Federal Executive Institute, the premier training institute for the U.S. higher civil service. For seven years he served as professor of Organizational

Behavior at the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, a senior professional military college in Washington, D.C. Bob has also been an adjunct professor at the University of Guam, Washington Technical Institute, and the University of Maryland, College Park. He holds a bachelors degree in Sociology from Livingstone College (Salisbury, North Carolina), a master's in Labor Relations/Personnel Management from Syracuse University, and a doctorate in Adult and Continuing Education from Virginia Tech.

Gail S. Funke is a senior faculty member at the Federal Executive Institute, and a policy analyst and organization development specialist. She is the author of numerous works on the criminal justice system, and has taught Sociology at James Madison University and Bridgewater College. She is currently leading a team developing a Managing Diversity Strategic Plan for the Federal Institute and the Eastern and Western Management Development Centers of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management. Gail milks cows at her Grade-A diary farm in Virginia.

Robert Anthony Maranto is a visiting scholar at the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, having previously taught at the Federal Executive Institute. He has taught at a number of colleges and universities, including James Madison University, the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Southern Mississippi. He is the author or co-author of three books on the higher civil service and co-editor of a forthcoming book on educational reform, as well as more than 30 scholarly articles and reviews. His works include: "Politics and Bureaucracy in the Modern Presidency: Careerists and Appointees in the Reagan Administration" (Greenwood, 1993); "A Short History of the U.S. Civil Service" (University Press of America,'1991); and "School Choice in the Real World" (Westview, 1999).