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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

MANAGING THE CHALLENGES OF PERSONAL APPEARANCE

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"If you're out of a job, buy a new suit." My father gave me this advice on several occasions when I was younger. I have acted on it at least twice in my life and it worked. Dad's rationale was twofold. First, looking good and treating myself well would support my self-esteem at a time when it was likely to be ebbing. Secondly, this confidence along with looking natty would enhance my chances of finding new opportunities. He was right on both accounts.

That was many years ago, but still today some of the most painful prejudices and costly biases in today's worlds are focused on the appearance of individuals. There are two levels at which individuals and groups suffer from how they look to others:

1. Actual physical characteristics. On this level one can be hindered by a group's standards for being too short, overweight, too light or too dark, too young or too old, "disfigured", or simply not graced with "good looks". One's natural or accidental features can fall into a range that is commonly found less desirable according to certain social or cultural norms. Some everyday cosmetic steps, as well as some extraordinary measures, can affect this to some degree. Suffice it to say that the incidence of cosmetic surgery, once a women's remedy, is increasing rapidly among businessmen. Normally, however, we have less control over our physical characteristics, sometimes none at all. For things to be different, what can and must change is the attitudes people have toward what they see, i.e., changing group norms, and often the attitude we have toward ourselves that reinforce these norms. Neither is an easy task because values about "looks" operate at an unconscious level and are constantly reinforced by everyday language, and in our western cultures, by powerful media images day after day.

2. How one dresses, makes up or comports oneself. We have more control here. We can, within our means, choose clothing and adornment that help us fit in or exclude us from a group's norms and fashions. Sometimes we deliberately choose not to fit in, in order to express our individuality or ideology. When enough people choose certain fashions or looks, they may begin to shape the expectations of the society around them. Thus, in recent times many people have come to accept such things as longer hair, body piercing, informal workplace dress and other deliberate ways we change our image or appearance. These trends come and go, and the issue is always, how well and how willing are we to meet the prevailing norms.



We are your candidates? We all have excellent CVs for the job. Whom do you feel inclined to hire? Why?

As a consultant I get a "cross-cultural" perspective on looks as I serve clients from one organization to another. Some organizations are convinced that their norms or codes are absolutes – that their dress code is the only legitimate way to appear in the world. Moving in and out of such worlds, my clothes closet becomes my costume collection. I pull out different items when I am working on Wall Street or in Silicon Valley, for IBM or Apple, at headquarters or on the shop floor. Flexibility is the watchword. I am the eternal immigrant, and one of the important intake questions is "What is the dress code here?" I tend to appear a bit on the conservative side. I find it is easier to "let my hair down" (bad metaphor for a balding guy in his late 50s) and become more relaxed if it seems right, rather than to regain dignity once an impression of informality has been made. On the other hand, it is often hard for both employers and employees to decide what is fair and legitimate to ask of each other when it comes to workplace norms about both physical characteristics and chosen appearances. Some of the considerations include:

- **Ability to do the job.** On the physical level can I perform what is asked of me? If I am too short for the top shelf, a ladder can solve the problem. A reasonable employer will provide this. But if I am asked to model spring fashions for twentysomethings, I just can't cut it on the runway, and no conceivable number of accommodations will make much difference. The employer is justified in going elsewhere.

- **Expressions of cultural, ethnic, religious, generational or personal difference.** If I belong to a group of people seeking acceptance or fearing assimilation, I may wish that my ethnic clothes or hairstyle would be accepted if not embraced by coworkers. Here I have to weigh the risks of others' willingness to include me if I look too different. Will I increase their tolerance or sign my own pink slip.

- **Loss of customers and income due to how an organization's personnel look.** Customer sales or service may suffer by what the customer thinks and feels about how I look. They buy from people who look a certain way, not from those whose appearance suggests unreliability, for example. The customer is always right, perhaps, but she or he can also be very biased or prejudiced or simply come from a background with different values. Both my employer and employee have a real stake in this and may need to make demands of each other or negotiate solutions. There can be a very fine line between educating and alienating the customer. On the other hand, not every employer's fears reflect the customer accurately. Many U.S. women have done successful business in Asia and Islamic countries where the appearance of any woman, to say nothing of one in western attire, might have been thought inadvisable before the fact.

- **Safety requirements.** If a hard hat will fit over Moishe's yarmulke but not over Amarjit Singh's turban, what then? Sometimes it is just this kind of diversity that will bring us to reexamine our dress requirements and come up with solutions that may both support diversity as well as enhance safety. This may not be easy or even possible in some cases. Yet where it is, new possibilities appear. The presence of turbaned Sikhs in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police added interest and diversity to the force rather than tarnishing the Sergeant Preston image.

- **Loss of excellent personnel because of bias about appearances.** Organizational norms both include and exclude. Reexamine these to see if they are costing the organization valuable human resources or making you an unfair employer. Appearance issues are hard to manage. Some years ago, a "progressive" city council in my hometown of Santa Cruz tried to legislate against "lookism." New ordinances forbade employers to reject applicants on the basis of their appearance. The effort was disastrous. It may have raised the community's consciousness of its biases about looks, but it polarized the community and was simply unenforceable. Research shows clearly that the "good" looking and the "right" proportioned get the jobs, the raises, the promotions and the sales. The undertow of our biases makes sure that these things happen on a regular basis despite many good intentions to the contrary. Yet biases about looks can be rejected, overcome or even change in an organization's culture.

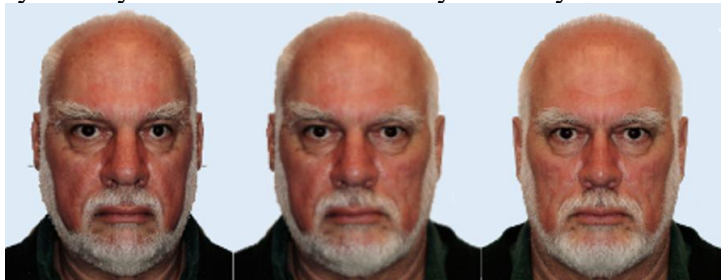
Do "looks" have a meaning beyond the cultural? Is there an innate advantage in good looks as we tend to define them? We find certain people attractive and are drawn to them. Some scientists suggest that this originally and instinctually has to do with safety and survival, i.e., finding and conferring the best genes on our offspring (literally or, in organizations, figuratively). But the environment changes. Whereas a former generation may have seen genetic success in the man with a paunch and a Rubenesque woman, today's health pundits incline us toward beauty that is slim and athletically buffed, people who might have been found wanting not too long ago.

Research also shows that people described as "cute" or "baby-faced" attract affection and caring behavior at an instinctual level. These are characteristics that can be measured in inches and centimeters and mathematical equations with reliability. We feel safe around such people. This seems important enough that when the perfect endowments are not obvious, we may start searching for them. If we succeed, we declare that we have found a "diamond in the rough," that this person's lisp is sweet, or that person's limp is endearing. In other words, because we culturally and personally define beauty, we have a power to make people look beautiful to ourselves or at least learn to find the beauty in them.

I have always thought of ability to see and appreciate beauty in others as a cross-cultural competency. Assumptions behind the story of *Beauty and the Beast* may be gender stereotypical and unfair, but the process of seeing through them and allowing our good will and love of others to change our perceptions of them is important. We create what is beautiful and beastly in the collective unconscious, in group consciousness and in the way each of us sizes up others.

In the early 1980's a psychologist from Anchorage, Alaska took photographs of people's faces straight on, printed the negative from both front and back, cut the prints down the middle, then matched the identical sides. One got two full face pictures one made of left sides and one of right sides of the face. He made a science of interpreting the personalities manifest in these faces. Scientific or intuitive? Hard to say, but he was able to bring up important issues for people who saw these "two sides" of themselves.

Is beauty more than "skin deep?" Apparently, people whose physical makeup is symmetrical, i.e., whose left and right sides mirror each other, score higher on intelligence, and are seen as beautiful. Such research findings bring us to diversity issues that cut both ways. Perhaps the "blonde bimbo" stereotype should not indicate dumbness, but intelligence. On the other hand, the same information could be used to justify and reinforce bias against those who lack the visual symmetry that makes them comely in the eyes of others.



Which is the real me? What impression does each view give you?

If one believes in the survival of the fittest as nature's first law, then there should be no surprise over the ascendancy and disappearance of species as environments change. Yet many of us have been moving towards the future with an awareness that could make us fittest species of all: Our ability to respect and preserve diversity and to value and explore its possibilities. Diversity is what will make us fit to survive and thrive now and in future environments.

As in the unvalued rain forest, the germ of survival for a future crisis may live in what we today see as the unattractive. Yet we live in a time one forms of populism and political autocracy would vanish the word diversity along with those who are different from themselves. Becoming conscious about the standards of appearance in your workplace or other culture group is the first

step in combating unfairness. Organizations and entire industries may have strong biases about what are the "right looks." This can happen in organizations that start with a group of likeminded individuals and continue to hire people that look like them.

Be alert to catch your own assumptions and those of others. Comment where necessary to prevent unfair assumptions from going unchallenged. Help people to understand how the standards work, even if you wish to challenge them. Learn to find, believe in, and enhance the beauty of your own people. A few years ago, I was called to work with a company in which the senior men posed themselves with hired models for the full color photos in the 10k report, bypassing the real women who worked in the organization. A devastating blow to morale. On the other hand, most of us have seen organizations where people get lots of recognition. This team or that individual gets pictured on the bulletin boards, the intranet and the external publicity of the organization in such a way that the world gets to know how proud they are of their folks. This need does not disappear in the world of outsourcing either. Whatever our arrangement, these are the people we work with, and we are either proud of them, or we shouldn't be working with them.

Modesty and self-esteem are not opposites. Rather, they go hand in hand. Being at home with ourselves and our looks and our self-expression, our accent, and the thousand other things about us that make us unique enables others to embrace us as we are as well.

It ain't a perfect world. Resistance and adversity still form character. Our ability to deal with unpleasantness and rejection on the part of others enhances our ability to survive and succeed. The diversity enterprise of recent years is not to remove all challenge, conflict, and discord from the workplace, but to make sure that the opportunities, risks, and the challenges are distributed as fairly as possible. Both "beauty" and "plainness" have their costs, albeit different in any culture and organization. No one should be de facto excluded for one or the other. Yet each will face separate challenges, and even that can be a productive form of diversity.