



Manager's Guide to Understanding Affirmative Action

Publication 18

June 1996

Affirmative Action

Affirmative action is a complex issue that continues to be the focus of debate at all levels of our society — in the public and private sectors and by the media. While the nature and implementation of specific affirmative action programs may be altered over time, the basic characteristics of a defensible affirmative action policy remain unchanged.

The purpose of affirmative action is to break down old patterns of discrimination based on racial, ethnic, or gender stereotypes.

Although the goal of affirmative action efforts is to open employment opportunities that have traditionally been closed to women and minority group members, the policy of affirmative action is not meant to institute new forms of preferential treatment. It does not require or encourage discrimination against white males in employment, nor does it operate as a bar to the advancement of white males once hired. Affirmative action is simply intended to eliminate manifest race, ethnic, and gender imbalances in the work force by eliminating obstacles to fair competition.

Affirmative Action in the Postal Service

Affirmative action — along with safety, service, fiscal integrity, and productivity — is a vital part of the Postal Service's business objective "to strengthen employee and Postal Service effectiveness." You, as a Postal Service manager, have a primary role in meeting this objective.

The Postal Service's commitment to overcoming the barriers to advancement for women and minorities is most clearly articulated in the May 11, 1995, *Postal Bulletin* message from the Postmaster General, "Equal Employment Opportunity, Affirmative Action and Diversity Policy." This commitment extends to individuals at all levels, including those in executive positions.

While statistics are important in measuring achievement of some Postal Service business objectives, postal managers may not use quotas in fulfilling affirmative action goals. Nor may a fixed number of new hires or selections be reserved for, or automatically given to, minority members or females. Employment decisions should not be made by designating positions for, nor by preselecting or affording preferential treatment to, minorities or women.

Statistics are nonetheless useful in assessing the need for legitimate affirmative action. Statistics on women and minorities in the workforce and at the various levels are required by law and are indicators of how employment opportunities are actually distributed throughout the Postal Service. Where underrepresentation of women and minorities appear, there should be some analysis to identify the possible disincentives or obstacles to upward mobility, and follow-up actions should be taken to eliminate such barriers. Affirmative action efforts cannot be limited to the time of the selection.

Initiatives that contribute to eliminating barriers to advancement include:

- Upgrading minority and female recruitment.
- Disseminating information about advancement opportunities in the Postal Service.
- Assisting the upward career mobility of minorities and females through training, details, or career development.

Diversity Development and Human Resources staff can play an important part in the success of these initiatives by monitoring recruitment and promotion activities and encouraging participation of minority and women candidates so that they can receive due consideration.

Your final decision on whom to promote should be based on the qualification and merit of the applicants or candidates. The candidate who best meets the requirements of the position, or is “best qualified,” is the candidate to promote. If you and those you work with take early action to identify underrepresentation and the barriers to advancement that create it, you will have a pool of candidates that includes qualified minorities and females.

Affirmative Action Myths

The myths that have developed around the subject of affirmative action sometimes cloud the issue for managers attempting to perform their important role in ensuring equal opportunity. The examination of myths that follows is meant to help clarify your responsibilities and limitations.

1. “Currently, most promotions in the Postal Service go to minorities or women.”

The Postal Service continues to make great strides in the upward mobility of minorities and women. During Fiscal Year 1995, promotions were closely in line with group representations within the postal workforce.

Group	Promotions	Work Force
White males	44.4%	44.8%
Women	33.9%	35.1%
Minorities	35.5%	33.5%

2. “If the minority or female candidate is not qualified for promotion, there is nothing I can do.”

Your responsibility as a selecting official begins long before the selection package reaches your desk. Your goal should be to assist in the upward mobility of minorities and females. If an employee is not presently qualified for a particular promotion, career counseling is in order. For example, is there an educational degree, a training course, a detail, a different career path to consider, or other advice that should be suggested to the employee? Quite simply, what does this employee need to prepare for future career advancement?

3. “I must select a woman or minority in the promotion package, even if he or she is not qualified.”

You should never select an unqualified person for a position — and affirmative action does not require that. The Postal Service policy is to select the “best qualified” person, the person who best meets the requirements of the job. If underrepresented categories are identified and career preparation occurs, then qualified minorities and females become competitive and are thus included in the applicant pools.

4. “In times of tight budgets, affirmative action considerations must be put aside.”

Even in tight financial times, employees must still be hired, assigned to higher level details, and promoted — and employees must plan their careers. Opportunities for these events must be provided equally to all employees, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender. While there are costs for some developmental assignments, such career development should not totally fall by the wayside. To provide equal opportunity, you should know the statistics on minorities and women in the workforce, note where there are gaps or underrepresentation, and take action to eliminate these gaps through recruitment, encouraging upward career mobility through training or details, devising career development plans, or disseminating information about advancement opportunities in the Postal Service.

5. “If there are no qualified females or minorities in my operation, I have no affirmative action responsibilities.”

You can examine the representation of females or minorities at different levels of the workforce to determine if there is underrepresentation of females or a particular minority group. The statistical representation is the starting place. If there are gaps, then you can support a variety of plans to ascertain if there are barriers that exclude minorities or women. Depending on the barrier identified, you may need to identify high potential minorities or females whose careers can be developed or to target groups for recruitment at the initial hiring levels.

6. “Responsibilities for the upward mobility of women and minorities should be left up to the Diversity Development and Human Resources staffs.”

Just as in the case of safety, ensuring that all employees have an equal opportunity for upward mobility lies with the individual employee and the line manager as well as with the Diversity Development and Human Resources staff. The individual employee exercises a high degree of responsibility for attaining the education, training, and flexibility necessary for career advancement. But you make the employment selections, and along with the Diversity Development and Human Resources staffs, should be attuned to the profile of the workforce and provide career counseling and developmental assignments.

7. “Because I am personally opposed to women and minorities in the work place, affirmative action is not my responsibility.”

There can be no personal agenda that affects the equal treatment of employees. Federal statutes and regulations and Postal Service policy are to provide equal employment opportunities to all employees, including women and minorities. To the extent that there are recruitment or promotional barriers to women or minorities in achieving equal opportunity, the Postal Service will act to eliminate them. It is your responsibility to ensure that the statutes, regulations, and Postal Service policies are carried out.

8. “Affirmative action gives an unfair advantage to women and minorities at the expense of white males.”

Affirmative action does not mean that preference should be given based on a person's minority or female status. Rather, affirmative action is a remedial process whereby an imbalance in the total workforce or at particular levels is identified and possible barriers contributing to that imbalance are eliminated. The white male is not discriminated against by this process. The affirmative development of the careers of women and minorities does not need to operate as a bar to the advancement of white males.

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