

# The Best of Intentions

by John Humphreys

*Is it ever right  
to discriminate  
against people for  
their own good?*

CYNTHIA MITCHELL just stared at her boss, Peter Jones. She admired him a great deal, but she couldn't believe what she had just heard.

"Let me get this straight," she said. "I shouldn't give Steve Ripley this assignment, even though he's the most qualified candidate, because the clients won't let him succeed?"

"It's your decision—and Steve's, if you decide to offer him the job. But I think it would be a big mistake," Peter replied.

"Because he's black," Cynthia prompted. "And because we're automatically assuming that the mostly white farmers in this district won't trust their books to a black professional?"

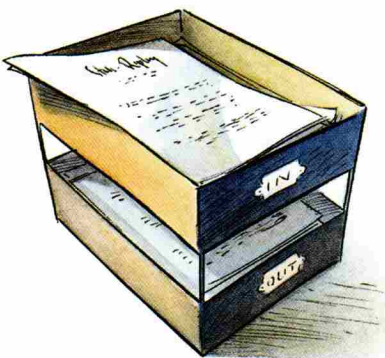
Peter flushed. "We don't assume it. We know it. Just ask Betty Inez and Hugh Conley. They were every bit as good as Ripley. But we—okay, I was blind to the unpleasant reality that plenty of discrimination still exists out there, like it

or not. Because of my ignorance, they both failed miserably in districts that looked a lot like this one. It wasn't their fault, but their careers with AgFunds got derailed anyway. I want to give Steve a fighting chance, and I want AgFunds to have a better record developing minority managers."

Cynthia sighed. "This feels all wrong to me, Peter, but I know you wouldn't raise the issue if it didn't have any substance. Let me think about it."

## Personal Experience

And think about it she did. Cynthia had flown to Houston earlier in the week for AgFunds' regional district managers meeting and had been enjoying getting to know her colleagues over dinners at a variety of excellent restaurants—a welcome relief from her rural Arkansas district, where the culinary choices ran the gamut from barbecue to, well, barbecue. She was new at her job, and the



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other district managers—all white men—had made her feel welcome and offered her survival tips.

Tonight, though, she stayed put at her hotel. First she worked out in the gym, then she ordered a Caesar salad and a beer from room service. While she waited for the food, she took a quick shower. When she finally settled down to her meal, she found she didn't have any appetite. The situation with Steve Ripley was making her really tense. It brought up bad memories. She sat back, sipped her beer, and remembered how her own career at AgFunds had started.

It wasn't so long ago. A Minnesota native with an undergraduate degree from Purdue, Cynthia had earned an MBA from the University of Kansas. She wanted to stay in the Midwest, and she wanted to work with the agricultural community. She had originally planned to pursue a career with the Chicago Board of Trade, but the opportunities there hadn't seemed promising. AgFunds—a financial services company specializing in investments and accounting services for farmers and farmer-owned cooperatives—had pursued her aggressively. She had joined the firm as an investment trainee in the Chicago office after graduation, just four years ago. Her first year wasn't that different from being in school; she spent most of her time studying for the exams she had to take to become a fully licensed representative. She thrived in the competitive training environment and was considered the top graduate in her class.

The best trainees that year were all vying for a position in northern Indiana. Mike Graves, a highly successful investment rep, was being promoted to district manager. Within six years, Mike had turned a declining stream of clients in Indiana into one of the company's largest and most coveted portfolios. Cynthia wanted the job badly and was sure she had a good shot at it. Her in-

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terview with Mike went well, or so she thought. She was half planning the move to Indiana when she received an e-mail announcing that the job had gone to her fellow trainee Bill Hawkins. She was genuinely surprised. Bill was a great guy, but his credentials didn't measure up to hers. In fact, she'd spent a lot of time tutoring him after he failed an early licensing test.

When she ran into Mike shortly thereafter, she congratulated him on his promotion. He seemed self-conscious, and before long he stumbled into an expla-

nation for why she hadn't been picked for the plum job: "Eventually you'll be a better rep than Bill. I know it, and you know it. But this just wasn't the right territory for you. It's very conservative. Our customers wouldn't be comfortable doing business with a woman. One day you'll thank me for not putting you into a situation where you'd fail."

Thank him? Cynthia had felt more like strangling him. But, like a good sport, she offered him some politically correct conciliatory statements—"I'm sure you made the right choice; you

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know the territory,” and so forth – and kept looking. A month later, she landed a less appealing but perfectly adequate sales rep’s position in a northern Ohio district. Presumably, the district was more hospitable to women, though she’d had to prove herself to plenty of crusty male customers. Cynthia had done extremely well in the three years she spent there – well enough to be considered a rising star at AgFunds. So she wasn’t surprised when Peter, the Houston-based regional vice president who oversaw eight southern districts in Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, and Texas, recruited her to run the Arkansas district. The new position was a stretch; reps didn’t usually get promoted this quickly, but she felt ready for the challenge.

And it definitely was a challenge. Arkansas was once a great district, but it had been losing customers for 15 years, thanks to a 25-year veteran who had gotten more and more comfortable in coasting mode. Peter had finally pushed the guy into early retirement and brought Cynthia in to shake things up. The sales force wasn’t that bad; it had just been poorly managed. But Cynthia desperately needed at least one powerhouse rep. Privately, she admitted to herself that what she really needed was a clone of herself four years ago – somebody fresh out of school who was talented, ambitious, and extremely hungry.

She considered recruiting the second-best rep from her old region (he happened to be a good friend), but she wanted to look first at the recent crop

of eager trainees. She was intrigued to discover that Steve Ripley, this year’s top trainee, was inexplicably available three months after the training period had ended. He looked great on paper: a recent MBA from UCLA, a successful summer internship at AgFunds, a stint overseas as an economic analyst for the U.S. government. So why he was still available? Poor interpersonal skills, perhaps? When she met Steve, Cynthia discovered that this was far from true. He was personable, quick-witted, bright, an excellent conversationalist. He was also a black man in a company whose workforce was overwhelmingly white.

She had interviewed Steve just this week, while she was in Houston for the off-site, and she had ended the meeting wondering, very simply, how she’d gotten so lucky and when he could start. Within a few hours, though, her curiosity about why he was still available had resurfaced. When she asked a few discreet questions, her fellow district managers in Arkansas were evasive; they seemed uncomfortable. The longest-tenured of them finally told her that Steve wasn’t necessarily a great fit in some parts of their region and suggested that she discuss the situation with Peter before she made an offer.

### Set Up to Fail?

Cynthia shifted uncomfortably in her hotel room chair. She poked at her salad with distaste then scraped at the label on her half-empty Saint Arnold beer as she replayed this morning’s meeting with Peter in her mind.

It hadn’t gone well.

“We need to talk about Steve Ripley,” she had started. “He’s a remarkable candidate. Why wouldn’t I hire him if I could get him?”

“Your predecessor didn’t think he was a good fit,” Peter had said gently. “I have to tell you I think he was right. And it’s not because I’m a bigot. I can see you’re wondering about that. Steve’s fantastic. He’s one of the best trainees we’ve had through here in years. But the biggest customers in your district don’t want to work with a black guy. It’s as simple as that.”

“So if some big customers are discriminatory, we’ll let them dictate our hiring policy?” Cynthia had challenged.

Peter had winced at her remark. “Look, Steve’s going to be outstanding. He just deserves to start out in a more hospitable district. Once the right opportunity opens up, he’ll be hired, and he’ll do brilliantly!”

Cynthia, remembering the job she’d lost out on in Indiana, then countered by saying, “So Steve has far fewer opportunities open to him than other, less-qualified applicants do?”

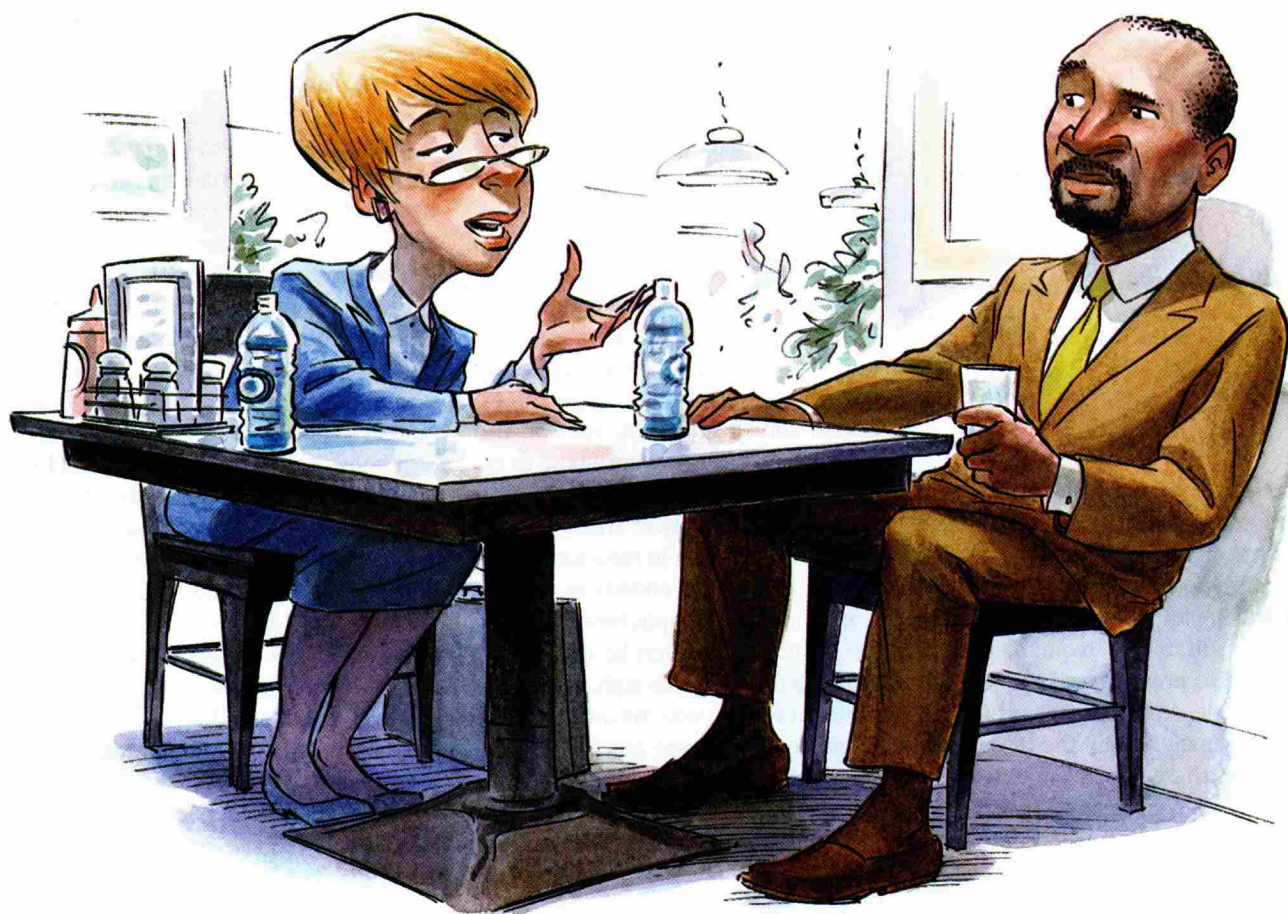
“I know it doesn’t sound fair, and in one sense it isn’t,” Peter had said. “But if Steve fails in his first assignment, it becomes extremely difficult to promote him – we’ll be accused of favoritism or the very worst form of affirmative action. And let’s not forget we have some obligation to maximize profits. I can almost guarantee you that won’t happen in your district if you hire Steve. If our customers won’t buy from Steve, it hurts the shareholders, it hurts Steve, it hurts you. Okay? How is that a good thing?”

### Cards on the Table

Cynthia didn’t sleep well that night. She tossed around, half awake, half asleep, agonizing about what her next step should be. Could she hire Steve against the explicit advice of her new boss? What would it mean for her career if Peter turned out to be right, and Steve didn’t work out? Undoubtedly the easiest course would be to keep looking, perhaps to hire her colleague from Ohio, who was, after all, a proven quantity. But that didn’t feel right.

During one of those 3 AM moments of apparent clarity that so often come to insomniacs, Cynthia decided to lay things on the line with Steve. At 8 AM, she called his house and asked if they could meet for lunch. He agreed.

“Look, what I’m about to tell you is sensitive,” she said four hours later as she faced Steve over glasses of bubbly water at the Daily Review Café. “So I’m taking a chance. But I’m sure you sense a lot of what I’m going to say, so let’s just talk about it openly.”



“Sure, what’s up?” He looked both quizzical and slightly disappointed.

“Oh Lord, he expected an offer,” she thought to herself. Cynthia took a deep breath and started by telling him the story of how she lost the job in northern Indiana to a less qualified candidate and how much that had bothered her. She filled him in on the conversation with Peter the day before. By the time she’d finished, he was leaning back in his chair, sipping his water, eyes narrowed.

“I’m not sure what to say,” he offered after a pause.

“No need to say anything yet. The thing is,” she continued, “this is a company where women and minorities can get ahead. I know that from personal experience. And I walked in knowing I had to work harder and perform better than other candidates. I’m sure you did, too. But the folks in senior positions sometimes decide what’s best for candidates without consulting them. I know I resented that a lot when it happened

*“The folks in senior positions sometimes decide what’s best for candidates without consulting them. I know I resented that a lot when it happened to me.”*

to me. I don’t want to continue that pattern. I’m not ready to offer you the job, but I do want you to know what’s being talked about, and I’m curious to know what your response is.”

Cynthia half expected Steve to start selling himself again, as he had during their initial interview – to ask for the chance to prove himself, even if it was a tough territory. But his response was more tempered than that.

“As long as we’re being open with each other, I have to say I’m not sure. I’d

like to stay in this part of the country for a few years, for personal reasons, but I don’t want to take a job that sets me up for failure. There are other districts in this region where blacks have done well.”

Cynthia was feeling deflated. “So—so you want to withdraw from being considered?”

“I didn’t say that. I guess I want to be sure that if you offer me the job, I won’t be walking into a disaster. I don’t mind long odds, but I don’t want impossible odds,” he responded.

Sensing her confusion, Steve smiled quickly, his considerable charm in evidence. “I’m sorry if it seems like I’m just lobbing the ball back into your court, Cynthia. But from what you’ve told me about your own experience, I trust you to make the right call. I really do.”

#### Should Cynthia hire Steve?

Five commentators offer expert advice beginning on page 36.