

By Firing the Google Memo Author, the Company Confirms His Thesis

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Most of the mainstream media refers to the former Google engineer's leaked internal memo as the "anti-diversity memo." Recode calls it "sexist." And Google fired James Damore for "perpetuating gender stereotypes." But in reality, the problem isn't diversity; it's that a senior software engineer admitted, perhaps unwittingly, to pondering three of the most scandalous thought crimes of contemporary American society.

The first crime is proposing that a meritocracy might be healthier for a company than bean-counting race, ethnicity and sex. The second is pointing out that ideological diversity matters. The third and most grievous of all is suggesting that men and women are, in general, physiologically and psychologically different, and thus they tend to excel at different things.

"On average," asserts Damore, "men and women biologically differ in many ways." He then has the temerity to accuse women of generally displaying a "stronger interest in people rather than things," of having empathy and "openness directed towards feelings and aesthetics," and of being less pushy and having less interest in status than male colleagues. Women, this guy says, are "more cooperative" than men and search out better "work-life balance."

There's much more, but I don't want to further upset any female readers.

One of the problems with this kerfuffle was that the vast majority of the histrionic reactions on social media and elsewhere have misrepresented not

only what the memo says but also its purpose. It was neither a screed nor anti-diversity. It was the kind of unvarnished, dispassionate and meticulous case that I imagine many engineers offer. It's difficult to believe anyone who read through it with an open mind could interpret the author's notions as an attempt to consolidate the patriarchy or make life less diverse in his field.

The other, bigger problem is the reaction to it demonstrates that the author is completely right about the lack of ideological diversity and the consequences of that lack.

Damore's contentions about the bias at Google is a near-perfect summation of the dangers manifest in all close-minded institutions, including most of the news media and many universities. He points out that conflating "freedom from offense with psychological safety" shames people into silence. Further, he argues that these monocultures foster unhealthy environments where people can no longer honestly debate important topics. Finally, and most destructively, he says that these bubbles then promote "extreme and authoritarian elements."

We see incidents of this kind of close-mindedness all the time in schools, in government and in business. Just ask Brendan Eich, who was hounded out of the office of Mozilla CEO in 2013 for having had the wrong opinion on same-sex marriage in 2008, despite zero evidence that he had ever discriminated against anyone in his life.

Or, better yet, ask Danielle Brown, Google's new vice president of diversity, integrity and governance. She wrote in response to the engineer's memo, "Diversity and inclusion are a fundamental part of our values and the culture," and then rebuked the statement, telling employees that she wouldn't link to the letter because everyone disagrees with its contents. Rather than showing appreciation for diverse thinking among her ranks, Brown even went on to insinuate that the engineer's suggestions in the memo might undermine "discrimination laws."

Does Brown believe that dissenting Google employees will now feel safer sharing their opinions when they see that the company won't stand by those making unpopular ones? Because, after all, any old VP of diversity, integrity and governance can defend positions that confirm the biases of the majority of their workforce.

Of course, nothing in the letter states women aren't as good as men, or that women deserve less money, or that women aren't suited to be good at tech jobs, or that they should be victimized by the company. The author mostly theorized as to why self-selection might account for some of the disparity at Google.

This is certainly well within the boundaries of legitimate debate. Or it used to be. There are still people who believe human beings are diverse and complicated, and judging them solely by sex or color is just a ham-fisted social experiment. "Treat people as individuals, not as just another member of their group," says our engineer. His brand of American egalitarianism and idealism, however, is now frowned upon in large segments of society and at certain companies.

By firing Damore, Google confirms much of what he warns about. Of course, Google can take any political positions it likes. But its overwhelming power and reach into the everyday lives of so many Americans makes it a perfectly legitimate target for criticism.

"If we can't have an honest discussion about this, then we can never truly solve the problem," wrote Damore.