



Three Words, Major Dollars

By all accounts the kid was a “rounder.” He was born in California, joined the Marine Corps, and subsequently became a gas station attendant and railway brakeman on the Southern Pacific Railway. In 1968, on his way to his brakeman job, he was listening to a morning disc jockey in Palmdale, California. Convinced he could do a better job, he persuaded the manager to hire him. Natural progression, right? Railroad brakeman to disc jockey – sounds reasonable to me.

Thus began a broadcasting career marked by doses of brilliance, cocaine, creativity, alcoholism, tremendous charitable accomplishments, controversy, record albums, firings, hirings, books written, four daughters and one son, lawsuits, and finally having multi-million-dollar sponsorships by the likes of Staples, American Express, Procter & Gamble, and Sprint Nextel. He had a daily listening audience of 2.25 million.

It all came tumbling down when Don Imus uttered three words on the morning of April 4, 2007. Those words sent shock waves through the country like a nuclear device. It would still be front page material except for the tragic events at Virginia Tech less than two weeks later.

Those three words don't need to be repeated here, nor will we have to join the debate about free speech, etc. But I would like to use this incident as a leadership “learning point” about what is acceptable and what is not acceptable in the work place, so that leaders with good intentions might avoid a “career-ending injury.”

It is ironic that I was invited to speak to a group of Edens & Avant managers on April 5th. Edens & Avant is one of our home-grown business success stories of which we are so proud. Started in 1966 by Joe Edens, a Columbia native, the firm has grown to 230 employees in 10 offices from Miami to Boston. Edens & Avant owns 150 properties worth more than two billion dollars. Jodie McLean, President and Chief Investment Officer, is a Moore School graduate and recipient of the 2004 Distinguished Young Alumna Award.

As part of my leadership presentation for the company, I was asked to spend a couple of minutes talking about being aware of what we say in the workplace and how it could be perceived. Since this was only one day after the now-infamous Imus remark, none of us at the meeting was aware of it, since it took a few days to get traction and the subsequent national attention.

There is certainly not a problem with these issues at Edens & Avant, but I applaud them for their proactive approach in reminding their terrific managers to stay on guard. Hopefully their approach is a lesson for us all.

As part of my preparation for the presentation, I contacted Bobby Gist, who serves as Executive Assistant to the President for Equal Opportunity Programs at the University of South Carolina. He was kind enough to e-mail me a form he uses in his work. I enclose it here for your review. Although the form has to do with sexual harassment, we must realize the risks are not only about sexual harassment, but also about other areas.

Are you engaging in illegal sexual harassment in the workplace? You may very well be! Answer the following questions honestly and then determine if you, as an employee, manager or supervisor are vulnerable to a charge of sexual harassment.

Have you as an employee/manager during your employment ever . . .

I've Done It

I've Witnessed

Others Doing It

I've Never Seen Anyone Do It

1. Told a sex-related joke to either male or female co-workers in the workplace.
2. Called a member of the opposite sex a derogatory sexual name in the workplace.
3. Physically touched a member of the opposite sex in the workplace.
4. Engaged in verbal abuse of a member of the opposite sex in the workplace.
5. Withheld information needed by a member of the opposite sex in the workplace.
6. Displayed a sexist attitude or behavior toward a member of the opposite sex in the workplace.
7. Heard a co-worker make sexually related comments to a member of the opposite sex in the workplace.

All of the conduct listed in the exercise is behavior which you, as a leader, must stop. If you have done it, you must recognize it is wrong and not repeat it. If you have seen others do it, you must learn that it cannot be condoned or overlooked.

Actions, words and deeds in the politically correct society in which we live today can cost your career and your company millions.

Leadership Insight

The landscape has changed, and what we can and cannot say and do is now being scrutinized by many constituencies. It is unlikely that an ill-advised comment could cost our organization as much as the Imus comment did, but there could be great cost to our organization and our career. Lawsuits cost lots of money, and the adverse publicity may cost even more. The cost/benefit ratio is pretty clear. A test which you might consider applying is the "Mom Test." Would I want my Mom to hear this joke, or read this e-mail, or see this picture? If the answer is no, you have all the guidance you need.

One last thought: We judge ourselves by our intentions, but we are judged by our actions. On this slippery slope, our intentions are trumped by our actions.

There are basically two reasons why we, as leaders, should pay attention to these issues:

1. It is the right thing to do.
2. It is smart business

Either one of these is reason enough. Taken together, they are a powerful reminder.

I encourage your response to these thoughts. farlgroup@aol.com

Have a great day!

Please forward this on or send us the e-mail addresses of co-workers, friends or family members who might enjoy a monthly leadership thought.