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BLOGS

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Leadership Lessons From Bad News

Two big news items this week have affected people near and dear to me. First, I am an alumnus of the University of Oklahoma (OU). OU made national news this week due to the deplorable actions of now former members of its chapter of the Sigma Alpha Epsilon (SAE) fraternity, who were filmed chanting a racist song on the way to a party. The video went viral online, prompting a local and national outcry. OUs President, David Boren, moved swiftly to denounce the students actions and shut down the fraternity chapter. The second big news event occurred just down the street from my downtown Minneapolis office when, Tuesday morning, Target Corporation told approximately 1700 headquarters employees that they no longer have jobs. It was a somber day downtown.

What do these two events have in common? Aside from being big news, they remind me that being a leader is hard and that your actions can be highly visible. In my view, though, OU President David Borens response to the OU SAE members disgraceful actions was spot-on. President Boren did exactly what I would advise an employer to do if employees engaged in similar conduct with evidence on film. He did not wait until the outcome of a full investigation to condemn the actions. He also did not dismiss or diminish the cultural importance or impact of the behavior by chalking it up the misguided actions of a few individuals or saying boys will be boys. News reports confirm that specific students identified as leading the chant have been expelled.

The SAE house really was home to some True Gentlemen in my day. It is unfortunate that the inexcusable actions of recent SAE members has sullied the reputation of their chapter. But, leaders have to act for the organization as a whole. President Boren did that, apparently recognizing that pulling punches and lowering standards does not do anyone any favors. In the employment context, excusing intolerable or poor conduct on one occasion makes it all the more difficult to take necessary and appropriate action if a similar future incident occurs.

Target CEO Brian C. Cornell has also had to take bold and visible action this week. He is likely not the most popular figure in some Minnesota households this week, but leadership often means making tough choices with the long-term view in mind.

As an employer or leader, are there difficult tasks you have been avoiding? Are you inviting greater legal risk or increased difficulty because of your delay and possible personal discomfort? If so, here are a few reminders to help you keep your house in order:

- Be Thoughtful: Use documented decision-making processes that are as objective as possible and that can be clearly explained and defended if necessary.
- Be Consistent and Fair: Inconsistency and a sense of unfairness increase the practical risk of legal claims and can create problems in defending against claims that do arise.



- Take Your Time: Employment decisions should not be made in haste or out of emotion. No one does his or her best thinking in the heat of the moment.
- Be Respectful: Treat employees with respect, even when you have to make and implement tough decisions. This can help reduce the risk of legal claims. No one likes to receive bad news, but it will be received more poorly if delivered without respect.