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Appropriate/Inappropriate Communications: "What Did I Say?"

Track: Management and Personal Development

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Summary: Corporate executives, consultants, vendors, and all levels of employees have responsibility for appropriate communications. Examples of inappropriate communications are:

- "You're a woman of many attributes. You should wear that dress more often."
- "The black jelly beans always fall to the bottom of the bag."
- "I want to have Jim accompany me to the sales meeting. He's a great asset on my arm."

These types of communications have resulted in lawsuits and costly resolution of conflicts.

The instructor leads participants in a discussion of examples of inappropriate communications and the impact on individuals and organizations. A useful model showing the relationship between perception and intent is demonstrated.

Ms. Beverly B. Alter: My firm is a women-owned business, and I am the owner. We are specialists in career management and diversity and performance systems, which obviously includes communication. We are servicing communications and businesses globally, and we are usually at conferences as we are today. I founded the firm in 1979.

Appropriate/inappropriate communications is a very interesting topic for the 21st century because, as we are changing our world of work, our demographics are changing, and as a result we have to change. One of the questions that invariably is going to come up is, when are we going to get to the point where we don't have to keep watching our words? When are we going to get to the point where we don't have to be so particular about what we say? When can we just relax with our communication so that everybody understands that we do not mean anything by what we say, even if we say something wrong? My response to that is, have we done that yet? We have decades and decades of having to understand the changing world, and groups of people with whom we didn't work before, but with

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whom we are now working; that means that we have to be very respectful about communications, and that's what this is all about.

We're talking about appropriate and inappropriate communications. We're talking about the need to be respectful. We're talking about the need to be inclusive.

We're talking about the need to be articulate with people with whom we work: customers and clients, coworkers, our seniors, our juniors. As we begin to look at our workplace, we begin to see there are many different people with whom we communicate. We wish to maintain relationships; communications are the way that we maintain and build those relationships.

By the year 2010, 85% of those entering the workforce will be women, minorities, and immigrants. Today it's 60%. What does that have to do with the way we speak and communicate? By the year 2010, workers over 50 will make up at least 50% of the workforce. What difference does that make? We're talking about inclusive communications. We're talking about being sensitive. We're talking about having coworkers and clients with whom you're going to be working and communicating that are over 50. Any implications?

From the Floor: Speaking as someone who is over 50, I think it's fair to say that by the time you get to 50, you're pretty ingrained in the way you communicate. Those people are going to be mixing with the other 85% who are entering the workforce, and there's a possibility for a clash there.

Ms. Alter: That couldn't be a better answer. We, who are over 50, have a tendency to be a little bit set in our ways. We have a tendency to believe that the way we've always done it is the way that it should be done, and we have a tendency sometimes to believe that all these new workers, the gen-Xers, don't understand. We have a tendency to believe that the way we've always spoken is perfectly OK, and some of the language and descriptors that we have used for different classes of people are perfectly OK. Since 50% of the workforce is going to be over 50, we have some learning to do.

Can we put another spin on this? The younger people need to be more sensitive to the over-50 workers. How? Should the younger workers say whatever we say, because it's been the way we've done it forever? No. We as older workers may need to accept those challenges.

By the year 2050, more than half of our population will be people who we now call people of color. Implications for our communications?

Mr. Michael Braunstein: The current majority becomes the minority.

Ms. Alter: Absolutely Michael. We're watching that happen all over. What used to be the majority is now becoming the minority. What does that mean in terms of how we're inclusive or respectful in our communications? Can you envision a culture clash? How about in a corporate culture? How about as you work in your companies and you begin to identify the 50% of your population we might call people of color? I'll throw out an idea. I'll throw out the word "holiday."

Complications in communications? How? I see heads nodding. Yes. Kwanzaa, absolutely. We're going to talk about Kwanzaa because there was a very serious infraction that was perpetrated by a very senior person at a very large corporation that had to do with the word "Kwanzaa," and I'm going to have you recognize that as we go ahead. We have people who are communication specialists who run the communications department of our corporation. When we're talking about putting out a directive or putting out a communication about holidays and we forget that 50% of our population may be called people of color, what happens? Does it matter? "Oh, it was just a mistake. It was an oversight. Not a problem." I'll show you some impacts in just a minute. It is a problem!

Between 1970 and 1994, interracial marriages leapt more than fourfold from 676,000 to more than 3 million. This takes a little secondary thinking. This causes you to have to think past the obvious.

You have coworkers and you're sitting around having coffee or at a meeting, or after work you all go out for a beer or a drink and you're talking, and you're communicating and you hear something insensitive. How did that make you feel?

From the Floor:: I'm in an interracial marriage and I was offended by a comment I overheard from a coworker who wasn't aware of my situation.

Ms. Alter: We have to understand that our audience is not just those people who stand or sit with us as we're talking. Our audience is those people who are related, or who are loved or cared for by those people who are sitting around those tables.

Mr. Braunstein: I would think that in addition to the emotional reaction, the person who made the comment probably lost credibility in your eyes as being someone who you could trust. Is that right?

From the Floor: Yes.

Ms. Alter: And what happens when we lose trust in our workplace? Is that a business issue? We're here for the SOA because you are talking about improving business. If we can't trust the person who is in this circle of coworkers because we don't believe that they would respect us or include us or others who might be part of our family or people we love or care about, then we begin to lose that trust. So we need to understand that as the culture and demographic picture changes, it's not just the visible but the invisible that we need to pay attention to.

Over the past two decades, the number of discrimination lawsuits has risen by more than 2,200%. Approximately 1 of 55 lawsuits filed in the U.S. is a discrimination lawsuit. Does that have anything to do with communication or did I throw it in here just for fun? How do lawsuits start? What do we sue people for? How do we violate people's rights? Yes, words or actions. We're not going to talk about words or actions, but lawsuits. Big-time lawsuits costing your company a lot of money, begin sometimes with the people who are sitting next to you, so we're talking about language. We're talking about inclusion, we're talking about respect,

and we're talking about those things that will prevent these kinds of discrimination lawsuits, because they typically come from actions or words.

Mr. Braunstein: Even if a prejudicial action doesn't exist, sometimes words will lead people to believe that there's an underlying attitude, and that could lead to an action.

Ms. Alter: It can be all about perceptions, and about 90% of the infractions are the result of a major *faux pas* where someone has said something offensive. So we have lawyers, and we have the unions, and we have a very messy case. It's not always because the person did it on purpose. It's usually because the person didn't understand that there was anything wrong with what he or she was saying. What can we do about this? Education. It is our responsibility. We can no longer just say that we're just going to do it the old way regardless of what's changing in our world. We can't do that anymore.

From the Floor: What has really changed about this whole process? It seems as if this kind of stuff was always going on in terms of discriminatory comments. Now everybody seems to be so overly sensitive to it. What has caused that to happen?

Ms. Alter: What has happened? People are talking about it more. One of the reasons that it has become more evident is because we have more numbers. If we have more people who are more representative of more differences who are sitting together and working together, then the conversation is going to come up. When we have most of our workforce as white males, and we have a couple of representatives from the female gender, a few African-Americans, and maybe two Asian people who work in the company, the voice of those minorities is not likely to be heard or be considered.

As our numbers are changing, people are speaking out and saying, "I don't want to be referred to like that anymore. I don't want to have people talking about me like that. I don't want to have anyone talking about my husband like that. I'm going to speak out because now I have help. I have other people who are like me." Numbers count. What else has changed? Media. Technology and media are making it so that we hear these things. We hear about the lawsuits. We hear about the infractions. We hear the hurt feelings. We watch Oprah. What are all of her most recent shows about? Spirit, and who I am, and what I believe, and what I want to be respected for, and what you should be respected for.

The cost of employee litigation runs between \$20,000 and \$200,000 per case, and that's very conservative. Typical punitive awards for plaintiff's employment-related lawsuits were approximately 10% of the defendant company's equity, and I'll give you some specific cases about that.

So, not only is it a nice thing to do, and a respectful thing to do to understand the person sitting next to us, to learn about the different cultures, to learn how we can be more respectful, not only to those people who are visible to us but also to those people who are invisible to us, it is a business imperative. If every single one of you

were to be offensive enough to cause a lawsuit and you were to impact your company by 10% of its equity, we'd all be in trouble.

Merrill Lynch agreed to pay \$600,000 to 8 female brokers who sued the firm for gender discrimination. Mitsubishi paid a record \$34 million to settle the biggest sexual harassment case in U.S. history. Texaco settled a \$176 million discrimination class-action suit filed by minority employees. The chain that owns Denny's settled a \$46 million discrimination suit in 1994 filed by black secret service agents who complained that they were denied service at an Annapolis restaurant and by California students who claimed discrimination in a separate suit.

Denny's is now in about the sixth serious lawsuit, yet the parent company of Denny's is doing more for education, training, and development than any other company, and they're beginning to make a dent. Why is Denny's a great vulnerable organization? Why is it likely that Denny's might be sued?

From the Floor: Deep pockets.

Ms. Alter: What else? They're everywhere, so control over the person who greets you at the door is important. It is the person who meets you at the door who has caused almost all the lawsuits for Denny's. Their single responsibility is to meet the guests at the door, treat them respectfully, and give them a seat, yet it's very hard to make sure that those people who are standing at the door believe in inclusion and respect, or are even up-to-date with what isn't inclusion and respect.

From the Floor: They have a lot of customers, and some slip through the cracks. If I'm a white customer, I'm not going to figure that I'm being discriminated against. If I'm a black customer and I see a white customer seated, I might figure that there is discrimination there even if there isn't. Even if it's a coincidence that one out of ten times, or one out of five customers, some proportion doesn't get treated as well as a customer should have. It may not be racial discrimination.

Ms. Alter: Excellent point. As we read about the fact that Denny's is being sued because they have not treated African-American customers as well as they've treated white customers and if Denny's doesn't seat me right away, I might not think anything about it. However if I'm an African-American customer and I've just read these articles and I know this is going on, I could easily make the assumption that not getting seated was due to discrimination.

This is a positive one. Avon experienced a \$1 billion increase in sales when they expanded their workforce to reflect a broader customer base. Anybody know what they did? Communications come in all forms. Avon used to be the Avon lady right, and who are the customers? Housewives and ladies. Now who are the customers? Men. What did they do with a whole new line of male products? Did they make them and put them in a warehouse somewhere? No, they advertised, and they started to include the male population, and by that advertising communication they increased their business by inclusion.

Let's discuss the gay and lesbian markets and their \$800 billion in annual income. There is concentration in 38 of the top 56 metropolitan centers. What are companies beginning to do? This fact has become much more recognizable than it was before. Remember, \$800 billion in annual income. Is that a marketplace that your company might take advantage of? What if our communications on TV, our companies' communications, or our advertisements were very exclusive of this population?

Government statistics and reports show that workplace violence costs organizations \$36 billion per year. How are we violent against people? I'm asking you to make connections in terms of communications. We can be violent with insults. We can be violent with our words. Can we not? Can we sue someone for verbally assaulting us? Yes, we can. Does that cost our company money? Yes. Do we all have the same level of understanding of what violence is and what isn't violence? No. The person next to me may think that calling me some name with expletives and really shaking his or her finger violently at me and coming over to my side of the desk without touching me is not violent at all. I think it is.

Kodak paid out \$13 million as a special raise to 12% of its female employees, one-third of its African-American employees, and a small number of its Hispanic workers. Anybody know what happened here? A corporate communication was sent out about training and development that completely and totally excluded their representation of minorities. It was one of the quickest lawsuits that was ever settled.

In the state of Connecticut, one lottery worker was extremely aggressive in his workplace. His language was aggressive. He was very unhappy about his workplace situation. He thought he was owed a promotion. He was not promoted because of his communication style and his aggressiveness in the workplace, yet nothing was done about that. Nobody ever said I think we ought to pay some attention to this individual, and he came in with a shotgun, and killed the CEO and four of his senior people. It was one of the most brutal scenes in the Connecticut area, and the entire building was taken down and rebuilt afterward.

We've been talking about words and acts. Let me tell you about the most typical words and acts that can be and have been recognized as being offensive, and let's see what you think about them. Blonde jokes; anybody in here still telling blonde jokes?

From the Floor: Yes, I do. Depending on the context and who I'm talking to I don't think there's anything intrinsically wrong.

Ms. Alter: He tells blonde jokes depending on the context and the audience. Elevator eyes. I overheard one gentleman say to another, "He is so embarrassing. I know he's my coworker, and he and I have to go places and socially interact, but I am going to ask that that be changed. He is so embarrassing to me." He then demonstrated elevator eyes. He was offended by the fact that his coworker was

doing this, and he was going to ask to be sent somewhere else so that he didn't have to be with that person.

Can this kind of behavior be legally adjudicated? Can there be a problem if you exhibit elevator eyes? When a male meets a female and begins to assess that female with the eyes up and down, it can be. Typically it is a male who meets a female and makes the assessment, usually from the face to the middle of the chest and back up again, hence the name "elevator eyes."

Is this a problem in the workplace? Yes. If this continues and a person, a woman, expresses displeasure at this behavior, it can create a sexual harassment lawsuit. Or if a woman is consistently identified as being harassing, and the male feels that this kind of behavior is offensive to him and, if this creates what we call a hostile workplace (a hostile workplace is one of the tests of whether sexual harassment has taken place) and that person can prove that this female and her elevator eyes is creating a hostile work environment for him, it can be adjudicated.

From the Floor: What should you do if you see this?

Ms. Alter: Usually the person should report the behavior. If it happens to be a lower-level employee, usually they go to a coworker first. A coworker, if they are knowledgeable, will refer you to your superior or the manager. The manager then makes an effort to watch the behavior. All you need is repetitive claims that are in some way justified by an outside source, and you have a case.

From the Floor: What about provocative clothing?

Ms. Alter: There is a problem only if the dress of the plaintiff is contrary to the dress code of the organization.

From the Floor: What if, as a manager, I am unaware of a problem?

Ms. Alter: You are responsible for sexual harassment if it occurs in the workplace whether or not you claim you are aware. That's pretty scary. That means that you, as managers, must be aware, and you must make your employees aware of the policies and procedures. Share the responsibility with them by making sure that they understand that both you and the corporation can be liable if sexual harassment is taking place even if you're not aware. You must be aware.

From the Floor: Let's assume that you find out that one of your workers is guilty, and you don't terminate that person on the first offense. Then, subsequently he or she does it again. Is the company liable?

Ms. Alter: You don't have to terminate, but you have to begin the steps and procedures. The steps and procedures are different for every corporation, but they typically require reporting to human resources (HR), requesting a formal report from HR, having HR investigate the case, then having the appropriate management team be aware of the case, and then warning to the person according to corporate

policy. If the warning is ignored, termination is appropriate. If the company does that, then they're covered, especially if they do training.

Mr. Braunstein: What if the harassment continues while all those bureaucratic processes are going on?

Ms. Alter: As soon as someone is notified, repeat behavior can result in termination. It is the same thing for patting and touching. We have our patters and we have our touchers, but we all know the limits of that, right? Wrong! It is definitively not OK according to the law. So, if we're willing to do a little patting and touching because it's the way we do business, we are taking responsibility for what might happen.

From the Floor: In the company where I work there are a lot of people who, for religious reasons, will avoid any physical contact with members of the opposite gender, and that includes shaking hands. Now, if a man in that position shakes hands with male colleagues or subordinates but doesn't shake hands with the female colleagues or subordinates, the female subordinates may be offended because they're being treated differently. They feel that they aren't being given the same respect. Do they have a lawsuit?

Ms. Alter: No. What has to happen in that situation is that someone needs to know. The question is always about communication and letting people know. If there are cultural norms that you want to respect because of your religion or cultural background, it is technically your responsibility to let people know that you are not discriminating against them or excluding them, but asking them to understand that this is what you believe in.

From the Floor: Then in theory you have to tell every woman you would come in contact with that I can't shake your hand for religious reasons?

Ms. Alter: It would be a better thing to do. Hopefully people will hear that. Hopefully you don't have to go to every person, but, by explaining it to someone, the word is going to travel. Don't be offended if so-and-so doesn't shake your hand. His or her religious beliefs prohibit that.

Anybody here old enough to remember when the word "crippled" was OK? We even had hospitals called "the hospital for crippled children." Is the word "crippled" OK anymore? No. Who said it's not OK? It was the constituents of that class themselves who said we do not believe that we should be called crippled. So then we said we'll call you handicapped. Is that OK? We have signs all over the place for handicapped parking, don't we? What are the constituents of the group of people whom we might have called handicapped preferring that we call them now? It is now preferred that a person who is formerly called handicapped be referred to as a person with a disability—not a disabled person, but a person with a disability. In some situations, the people with the disabilities are asking that they be specifically identified: i.e., I am a person with a visual disability. There are people in this room with visual disabilities, and possibly other disabilities.

From the Floor: You said that members of this class, the people with disabilities, don't like the terms "crippled" or "disabled." The problem is that the people who are going to make the argument about the words used are more prone to activism. I'm not convinced that the entire or even the majority of people with disabilities really objects to being called disabled. Of the few people I know in this class, maybe half a dozen of them object to the word "crippled." A friend of mine is permanently on crutches, and he'll refer to himself as a gimp. His friends will say the same thing, and he doesn't object.

Ms. Alter: You're talking about the issue that has to do with audience. If I am a person with a disability and I decide I want to call myself a gimp I can, but you can't.

Does it matter if it's the activists or not the activists? That it is what is being promoted right now by the people in that class. All we need to know is, do we have customers who are people with disabilities? Do we have coworkers who are people with disabilities? Do we have family members who are people with disabilities, and if they know that they would be preferred to be called people with disabilities and you don't know it, what happens? Think about it.

From the Floor: Are you saying that using the wrong terminology is actionable? What if a company has just printed up brochures to train their people and they've used the word "disabled" and, after they just printed it, they find out you shouldn't say disabled people? Are they legally obligated to throw all that in the garbage? They should not necessarily throw out the printing job. They may just wait till that gets used up, and then the next time they'll print the term correctly.

Ms. Alter: Well, this is typically not actionable right now. However if it in any way can be proved under the Americans with Disabilities Act that the language was discriminatory, that in some way the choice of the words that were used in that publication discriminated against people with disabilities, then it's actionable. If it's just a matter of language and there is no discrimination, it's not actionable; it's disrespect.

Ms. Alter: Is there anything wrong with talking about people who have different sexual preferences? What's the correct word? Sexual orientation. It would be nice if we could have open conversations about all of the differences in our workplace, but it's unlikely. If you were overheard by people who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual as referring to sexual preference, they're probably not going to get upset with that, but you're not going to appear as inclusive and state-of-the-art as if they hear you referring to it as sexual orientation. They hear you using the correct word. What is the message that goes along with that?

How about showing the bottom of your feet? What's wrong with this? If you are showing the bottom of your feet it is disrespectful; it infers dirty. So it would be better not to. A person was in a meeting, and it happened to be in Malaysia, and suddenly a couple of the people at the meeting just got up and left, and it took a day or two to find out what happened. The individuals were insulted by this senior

executive who continually sat with his legs crossed, showing the bottom of his shoes to the most important executive next to him. Does this matter to us on a daily basis? Maybe not yet. Maybe we don't have enough people from Malaysia or Thailand, but it's going to happen.

Girls. Is it OK to call women girls? There is no real age limit. Perhaps at 16 and under they're still girls. Hopefully, we don't have anybody in here who sits at their desk and says, "I'll get my girls together, and we'll get this work out." Do we have that? Please tell me no.

From the Floor: My boss, a woman, refers to her girls.

Ms. Alter: She is doubling the mistake by calling them her girls. What does that imply? Ownership.

How about "boys"? Now for the women in this room, do we usually refer to these gentleman who are sitting here as our boys? No. It's not really that much of an issue.

Here's a great one. "You people." It is extremely condescending, and the biggest danger comes when you have a group of homogenous people of race or special people, and a superior refers to that group as "you people." This is particularly sensitive for African-Americans. When you leave here today, think about how many times you might say "you people." It's part of the way we talk, and we really need to be careful.

"Slant-eyes." Very offensive. It used to be something that was written on walls in reference to Asian people. "Manpower." Manpower is now people-power. We have a group of people we call men, and by referring to all the workers as men in the organization as our manpower, we are being exclusionary to the nth degree. It is not manpower; it is people-power.

"Man-hours" is another one. If I'm working as hard as you are, I don't want it to be referred to as manpower, because I've put in my power too. Yes, it's preferred to be "people-hours."

Consider various relationships. The mail carrier comes into my office to pick up packages and I wave to him or her—that's exposure. I have a client whom I've gotten to know somewhat, that would be an example of affiliation. Then I have my coworkers that I've partied with, and I spend loads of time with, and we have a mutually appreciative relationship. How does all that happen? How do we move from exposure, to affiliation, to a mutually appreciative relationship? By spending time, and by having communications and by understanding each other better.

Consider the span of time. If we're talking about exposure, we have spent little or no time. If we're talking about affiliation we've spent more, and if we're talking about mutually appreciative relationships where we really understand each other, we've spent a lot of time. If we are dealing with people with whom we only have

exposure, we run the risk of living in the world of perception. So, I can look at that delivery person, and I can overhear him or her say something that may be slightly offensive, and I have the impression that he or she is a racist or a bigot. However, I can be with friends of mine in a context that is different, since we have a mutually appreciative relationship, and I understand the comment.

You say my friends can call me a gimp, and it's OK. Is it? Do we always know when people are hearing us? No, we don't. So it is better to be careful and not say it.

Have I spent much time with someone? Am I at risk of them perceiving me in a negative way, or will they understand my intent if I goof? How about my coworkers; how about the boss and me? How's that relationship? Does he or she listen to what I say and view me and judge me at the level of perception, or does he or she understand my intent?

We make assumptions and we don't pay attention to the amount of exposure and the amount of time and the perception versus intent continuum. You or I might go to an audience and assume the audience will agree with us or will not take our words outside the room, or will not embellish what we've said, or will appreciate and understand our intent. But can I just assume he or she knows me? Will that person scrutinize every word I say, or not? I assume they will understand that jokes are jokes. Your audience represents all kinds of diversity; some will not be sensitive to issues, some will.

Let me tell you some flagrant examples of where this was not taken into consideration. "Black jelly beans always stick to the bottom of the bag." Anybody ever hear that? Do you know the company? Texaco. Who said it? The treasurer. A \$176 million lawsuit followed. The treasurer, in the boardroom with the senior executive committee, assumed that everyone in there understood him and wouldn't take his words outside the room. Who else was in the room? A tape recorder was in the room. With whom? With the HR director who had been trying over and over to get the senior management team to listen to the fact that the African-American members of this company were asking that the holiday, Kwanzaa, be recognized.

The African-American employees asked that they have recognition and the availability of one of their flex days to celebrate Kwanzaa. So, the HR person banging at the door to this treasurer and to the senior executive committee saying we need to listen, we need to listen, went to this meeting knowing perfectly well what he was going to hear. With tape recorder tucked in the pocket, he says we need to consider our African-American employees and their desire to have Kwanzaa recognized, and the treasurer said: "I just got over understanding Hanukkah. What are you expecting me to do? I'm interested in the profitability of this company and the black jelly beans always stick to the bottom of the bag." The reference to black jelly beans meant that the African-Americans didn't perform; that they stick to the bottom of the bag. Now, \$176 million for words out of one person's mouth. He was fired, and he lost 90% of his pension.

Think about Tiger Woods in the Masters Golf Tournament on TV, lots of exposure, everyone's watching, Fuzzy Zoeller, OK? For those of you who are not golfers, what do you picture as a golfer, prior to Woods? What do golfers look like? They look like Jack Nicklaus. What does Jack Nicklaus look like? White male with the appropriate country club attire. Along comes Tiger Woods, and everyone is watching golf. Everyone is watching golf because Tiger Woods is wonderful, and Fuzzy Zoeller comes along. At the Masters it is tradition that whoever wins the Masters gets to pick the menu for next year's reception dinner. So with the media present and all the microphones all lined up in front of Fuzzy, the NBC reporter asks, "what do you think of Tiger?" And he says, "I think he's a great boy." We didn't hear about that very much. "I think he's a great boy, but I sure hope he doesn't pick fried chicken or collard greens, or what ever else it is that they eat for our reception dinner."

What happened from the comments out of one person's mouth? Did he mean it? Probably not. Fuzzy's considered to be a very wonderful, personable guy. But, he hasn't been paying attention. He thought that in the context of the people who were watching golf, probably mostly white males, everyone would understand. That was a dangerous assumption.

As soon as that was out of his mouth, the phones started ringing, and 12 hours later what happened? He did not directly apologize, but his sponsor, K-mart, went on record at nine-o-clock the next morning to say that Fuzzy Zoeller's sponsorship had been revoked and that every piece of Fuzzy Zoeller equipment in the world would be taken out of K-Mart. That's a big impact from one person's words.

This next example came out of a company with flexible work arrangements. Isn't that the mother's program? Who did this offend? Not the mothers as much as it offended the fathers who were taking advantage of the program.

Our Mister Moms, the men who stay home with responsibility for taking care of children, did not like the reference to the mother's program. Where is the recognition for the males who are doing that?

Here's another. "If I could only make you people understand the meaning of time." There's a double insult here. Can you imagine, you've spoken stereotypically about African-American people. The "you people" is a very demeaning statement.

Another is, "I can't trust those Orientals; they don't look you in the eye." A manager was being encouraged to hire Asian people, and this manager had a bias. He felt that Asian people were extremely difficult to work with because they didn't talk enough; that they weren't expressive enough. He had all kinds of stereotyped descriptions. His final statement at this company occurred when the boss said, "We are creating an inclusive environment here, and it is important you understand the differences in cultures, and I want you to be inclusive," and he said, "I don't care what you tell me, I can't trust those Orientals because they don't look you in the eye."

It's dangerous. You're creating and applying assumptions about something that you believe applies to the entire world of Asian people, and that doesn't happen. We have Asian-American people, we have Asian-European people, and it's just really important that we don't apply stereotypical things. More importantly, the company is saying be inclusive and do what needs to be done to encourage an all-inclusive workplace. That language of yours, by the way, is really offensive.

"You really do justice to that dress you're wearing." Sexual harassment. It's OK to say that's a pretty dress if it doesn't go with elevator eyes and it doesn't go with behavior that can be considered by the recipient as being suggestive or sexual in nature. So, you can not come up to me and say, "Ooh, what a nice, pretty dress," and you can't come up to me and say, "That's a really pretty dress." So, we have to watch what we're saying.

This is a real management notice, which is incredible: "For flight personnel who service the Mexican and South-American routes, it is imperative that you stay on schedule. Your customers are known to linger, and be aware of inebriated behavior." One of our largest airlines in the U.S. put this out. This was distributed to all flight personnel. How did it ever get there? Answer that. I don't have an explanation. No one in any of my training sessions has been able to explain to me how we can have a published piece of information that goes to all flight personnel for an entire company without catching this.

What's the implication? That people who are of Hispanic descent, certainly Mexican is stated, just don't get to places on time and are found drinking tequilas at the bar. Who should've caught this? The person writing it should've caught it, and somebody else after that.

What should you do if your boss asks you to accompany him to a business dinner saying you look good on his arm and you will be rewarded if you play along? Who said shoot him? That's close, but then that fits into the workplace violence. We can't do that. What do we need to do about this? Tell HR; it's a good beginning. The first thing you should do is to announce to the person that what he just said is inappropriate and offensive to you. Notification is the victim's responsibility. Do we like doing that? No, but we have to do that. If we do not notify the individual that the behavior is creating a hostile work environment, we miss an important step. The key is to show a hostile work environment to argue sexual harassment. He must be told, and then he must be told that you are going to go to HR. Otherwise, you have no recourse.

From the Floor: Suppose I've made this comment and have been told. And, I agree, I was totally off-base. Can I erase what I've just done?

Ms. Alter: Yes. You are still on record, but what you need to do is to apologize, and make sure your apology is on record. So, the person who is being offended states to you, "I really don't like what you said. That's just something I don't want to hear, and it's not something I'm interested in doing, and it creates a very difficult, if not a hostile, place for me to work. I would appreciate it if you didn't ask me to

do this." I can then give you a break, and say I will not go any further with this. Apologize and make sure you write down that you apologized and note everything that took place. Keep a record. For sexual harassment, documentation is the most important thing. Documentation, documentation, documentation, with all the important details about what has been said.

If your boss calls you at home and makes comments to you such as "is this past your bedtime?" or "did I catch you at an inconvenient time?" or something about what he imagines you are wearing, or anything that has to do with an implication that he is thinking about you in ways other than work, that is also creating a hostile work environment. Generally, it's not good practice for the boss to call somebody at home about a work issue unless that's an agreement that's been made.

Suppose you know your organization has a zero-tolerance policy for any disrespectful communication. Suppose policy stipulates that any employee who witnesses this kind of communication must report the incident. Suppose you have just heard your boss telling a racially offensive joke. What must you do? First, tell him. Second, document it. Third, report it to HR.

You're a gay man and you hear a group of employees jokingly listing the name of all the faggots who work in this place. Does this happen? Yes. I hear this story over and over. What do you need to do? What should you do?

You're not part of the conversation, but you heard it. What should you do? Say, "I overheard you. I find that offensive. I find that inappropriate," and then leave it at that or then take it to HR.

What about females running meetings with a visiting client from Iran? If you, a female, have been put in charge of all the meetings and negotiations, is there anything you need to do? This is a very touchy issue. I would suggest any of you who are dealing with clients find out customs before you entertain.

Know yourself. Are there any words in your vocabulary that could be offensive? Are you prone to saying things that were OK as you were growing up, but are not OK now? Do you demonstrate behavior that could be misinterpreted? Know your audience, even if it's one person. Become culturally aware. Do a people audit, and review the information you have about your coworkers. Are there specific communication requirements? Look at your receiver. In most cultures eye contact is positive; in some cultures eye contact is not.

What culture is specifically more sensitive to too much eye contact? The Hispanic culture. When we're delivering difficult messages, use the "I" message. If I'm upset with you, instead of saying you are always late say "I" instead of you. I'm feeling as if you're not putting in as much time as I need you to. Again, use "I" messages instead of "you" messages.

Know the legal guidelines for your organization. Listen carefully. E-mail has become a great potential for misunderstanding and for lack of inclusion. Be careful

with your e-mails. People on the other end cannot see your face or understand you. Talking too much is a problem. Don't assume that kidding around is always OK.

Decide on one thing that you think you could do better to be more inclusive and receptive with your communications, and recognize what is appropriate and what is inappropriate communications.