

THE EXTRA POINT

BY JERRY ROBERTS



1308 When a Leader's Damage Control Turns Bad to Worse

Trust is tough to earn and easy to lose. This is one of the key lessons we teach in our course *The New Boss*. Mess with trust at your own risk. We have an update on our commentary about MillerKnoll CEO Andi Owen and her communication challenges. I'm Jerry Roberts, and that's next on The Extra Point.

When last we left Andi Owen, CEO of large office furniture maker MillerKnoll, she was on a Zoom call, telling her employees to forget about the fact that they weren't getting a bonus, to get out of "Pity City," and get back to work.

Owen, who reportedly paid herself a bonus, while her employees were not getting one, was roundly slammed by media far and wide as being insensitive, cruel, disingenuous, and pretty much tone deaf.

You could add clueless when it comes to how Zoom and social media can come together to be a problem for a CEO who is prone to losing her cool and criticizing workers on the call.

The call was recorded, the juicy parts uploaded to social media, Tens of millions of views later, there was a tidal wave of global outrage

So what should Andi do in the face of mounting criticism? How about suggesting she was ill and under the influence of a prescription that cause hallucinations? Naw, she didn't opt for that.

What if she said it really wasn't her, but an evil representation of artificial intelligence put out by a hacker? No, she didn't do that, either.

Wait, she could go on and say that because the company wasn't going to pay bonuses to those folks who were counting on them, that she was going to cancel hers as well. It may not have softened the blow of not getting the much-needed extra money for the employees, but at least she would have won the day on symbolism. Surely, she would see that this was what she needed to do. Uhh, nope.

What she did was to immediately say that the uploaded video was out of context. I saw the video. Even if what preceded it was equal to Owen and the others singing Kumbaya and giving virtual hugs, what made social media was ugly. That 90 seconds was not out of context. She was making a clear point.

Then, she claimed she wasn't criticizing, but trying to generate a "rallying cry" to motivate the troops, and that it "seemed insensitive." Finally, she had this: "What I'd hoped would energize the team to meet a challenge we've met many times before *landed in a way that I did not intend* and for that I am sorry."

Here's the lesson for anyone in a leadership role. Language matters and so does intent. Owen is not taking responsibility here.

Telling people to get out of Pity City over the loss of bonuses is what kind of "rallying cry"?

She said her remarks "seemed insensitive"? Seemed? Then, the things she said "landed in a way that I did not intend." Is that putting the blame on the workers, that they failed to pick up on her intention?

In going through all of these verbal gymnastics, she made everything worse. Therefore, she further loosened whatever bonds of trust she had worked to build over time. Why would you do that, when the better course of action was so obvious?

I'm going to clean this up for Andi. Here's what she should have said:

"In the past several days I have been soundly criticized for my words during our recent Zoom call. Every bit of it was deserved. What I said the other day was wrong. We're all working in tough times, and you have every right to be concerned about bonuses that are important for your financial well being. My remarks were totally insensitive, and I fully regret making them. (Con't.)

I'm sorry we can't pay bonuses at this time, which includes me as I won't be getting one unless you all get one.

You all mean the world to me and I won't rest, — and I know you won't either — until we have turned this situation around, and can once again enjoy greater financial rewards together.”

What Owen did was attempt damage control when she was being pounded in the media. Whether coincidence or not, MillerKnoll stock has fallen 30% over the past several weeks. Did that play into her decisions here?

When people didn't buy the “out of context” claim, she gave an apology, sort of. In my opinion, I think she made things worse.

If you screw things up by saying the wrong thing in front of your team, just admit it and ask for their forgiveness. That doesn't make you look weak, it makes you look strong.

It actually starts the process of healing and rebuilding trust.

That's the Extra Point. Be responsible and make something good happen today. For 93.3 and the Ray Gibson Show, I'm Jerry Roberts.

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