

Redstone's Reckoning: Political Expression vs. Professional Conduct

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Many organizations expect their employees to remain neutral by refraining from sharing political opinions both in the office environment and on personal social media platforms that could be associated with the company. This case study looks at the complex implications of a company discovering an employee sharing their political beliefs online with comments containing racist language. The incident triggered challenges regarding the balance between respecting individual freedom of expression and maintaining workplace standards of inclusion and respect. The study analyzes the company's response process, internal communication strategies, and disciplinary measures. The case is suitable to be assigned for in-class discussion in undergraduate Human Resource Management, Organizational Behavior, or Management Skills courses.

Keywords: human resources, workplace conduct, policy, political expression

HOOK

Richard Spencer, a widely recognized white supremacist (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2025), rose to prominence during a period of heightened political division in the United States. In 2016, Donald Trump's presidential campaign, propelled by the slogan "Make America Great Again," attracted support from various white nationalist organizations—including the KKK, American Renaissance, and the National Policy Institute. Spencer, who openly endorsed racial purity and "peaceful ethnic cleansing," expressed strong support for Trump's candidacy. Amid this political climate, Spencer publicly declared, "my ancestors ***** enslaved those little pieces of ****," referring to a minority group. This quote drew outrage but also underscored the appeal of extremist rhetoric to certain online audiences. Despite his controversial views, Spencer amassed over 100,000 followers on X (formerly Twitter).

In 2020, the ripple effects of this rhetoric surfaced in a corporate setting when the Redstone Inc. employee came across a reposted video of Spencer on social media. The post came from a colleague, Jared Smith, who had shared a clip of Spencer delivering another racially charged rant, along with the comment, "totally agree." Faced with this discovery, the employee felt an urgent responsibility to address the situation. However, the next steps—bringing this incident to the attention of the Human Resources department—posed a serious ethical and emotional challenge, as she had to navigate a difficult situation about racism and workplace conduct carefully.

To the colleagues who were familiar with Smith, this repost was surprising. Jared Smith was a manager at Redstone Inc and had worked at the company for three years. During his time in the company, he kept to himself and avoided any unnecessary attention. Ever since adapting to COVID-19 and new workplace structures, everyone who worked in the corporate office only had to physically be in office on Mondays and Wednesdays with other days declared as optional remote work by the top management. Smith would usually only be in office on the required days with some exceptions. Since his past behavior didn't raise any serious issues, it made the repost especially unexpected—and deeply concerning—for the Human Resources department when it was brought to their attention.

BACKGROUND

Redstone Inc. is a globally recognized commercial real estate services firm with a rich and extensive history spanning over five decades. It was founded in 1950 by Jamie Williamson and Robert Perez in El Paso, Texas. The company initially emerged as a small real estate brokerage focused on helping businesses navigate property transactions in the mid-20th century. The firm gradually expanded its services and reach from its humble beginnings, positioning itself as a complete real estate solutions provider.

Throughout the late 20th century, Redstone experienced significant growth, evolving from a local El Paso-based firm to a national and eventually international commercial real estate powerhouse. The company developed expertise in various real estate sectors, including office, industrial, retail, and institutional properties, offering property valuation, investment advisory, tenant representation, and asset management services. By expanding its service offerings and building a robust global network, the firm attracted major corporate clients. It established itself as a trusted advisor in commercial real estate.

In recent years, Redstone was involved in significant mergers, acquisitions, and global expansions. In 2010, Redstone was acquired by TMZ, a global real estate advisory group, which further helped its international reach. In 2017, it was merged with Britain-based Novi Corporation and the new company decided to retain the brand name Redstone. Today in 2025, Redstone operates in 90 countries with over 75000 employees.

Redstone continues to be a global leader in commercial real estate services, listed on the New York Stock Exchange and recognized for its notable approach to property solutions. The company serves diverse clients, including corporations, investors, government agencies, and property owners. They offer services such as property valuation, asset management, tenant representation, capital markets analysis, and strategic consulting. Redstone remains a significant contender in shaping the global real estate landscape, by continuously adapting to technological advancements and evolving market needs.

THE WORKPLACE CONDUCT

It was a routine weekday at the office, and the Human Resources team had just begun preparations for Redstone's annual physical confirmations. Meanwhile, Theresa Williams, the Director of Marketing, was reviewing the company's social media activity when she stumbled upon a troubling repost shared by managerial employee, Jared Smith. The content, which had been shared within the past week, included a highly inappropriate message that could easily be associated with discriminatory views. Concerned about the potential implications, Williams promptly walked across the office and knocked on HR Generalist, Clara Thomas's door. She didn't intend to file a formal complaint but wanted to bring the matter to HR's attention in a discreet manner.

Recognizing the matter's sensitivity, Thomas appreciated Williams's proactive approach and carefully listened to her concerns. Williams emphasized how Smith's public alignment with such content could reflect poorly on the company's brand and corporate image. The conversation not only highlighted the urgency for Human Resources to evaluate the situation by launching an investigation in which the accused has an opportunity to explain his side of the story but also made it imperative for the department to act swiftly and strategically to prevent any potential escalation. In the meanwhile, Thomas documented the post with a

screenshot, understanding the need to monitor the situation closely. Later, she set up an investigation informing Jared's supervisor, Diane Petyon, and the Director of Employee Relations, Ethan Brown.

As a part of the initial steps in the investigation, Thomas and Brown, met with Jared Smith to verify the authenticity of the content he had supposedly reposted. It was a difficult conversation, which started by Thomas saying, "We had one of our employees come to us and show a social media repost supposedly made by you in agreement with a known white supremacist. Is this true?"

Smith replied, "Who informed you about it?"

Brown intervened: "That's irrelevant. This is a confidential matter, and we need to abide by company policy to keep the identities of everyone involved anonymous. Can you please verify whether it was you who reposted the original content by Richard Spencer and then commented, 'Totally agree'?"

Jared Smith, visibly uncomfortable, looked around the office and avoided eye contact. After a long pause he finally responded – "Yes, that was me."

Thomas - "Thank you for your honesty. We're going to have to consider the situation and the company policy regarding such employee behaviors and take a decisive action. You'll hear back from us in the next couple days at the latest."

Smith left the office with his head down and shoulders slumped.

Thomas looked at Ethan Brown who sighed heavily. She says, "You know what this means right?"

Brown responds, "Yeah, we're going to have to push annual physical confirmations back and focus on dealing with this situation."

"How should we approach this?"

The next step in the process was carefully reviewing company policies on harassment and discrimination to assess whether Smith's actions constituted a policy violation. The policy read, *"Examples of prohibited conduct under this policy includes epithets, slurs, negative stereotyping, intimidating acts, and the circulation or posting of written or graphic materials that show hostility toward individuals."*

Based on this framework, the investigating team determined that the reposted content fell under the scope of the company's Anti-Harassment and Anti-Discrimination Policy. This policy clearly outlined prohibited behaviors, including any form of verbal, written, or digital expression that promotes hostility or marginalization. Notably, the policy applied uniformly to all employees, regardless of intent, and explicitly included conduct occurring in digital spaces that may impact the workplace environment. Thus, Smith's repost was determined as a breach of these guidelines and warranting a corrective action. The violation stemmed from his decision to repost content that exhibited clear hostility toward individuals based on personal characteristics, which directly contradicted the organization's commitment to fostering an inclusive and respectful culture. As a result, appropriate measures were deemed necessary to address the situation and mitigate any further reputational or interpersonal fallout. However, despite clearly defining prohibited conduct, the company's Anti-Harassment and Anti-Discrimination policy lacked a prescribed procedure for dealing with infractions. Thus, Human Resources had the discretion to assess each situation on case-by-case basis and choose the best course of action depending on the incident's gravity and impact on the workplace. While the repost itself warranted disciplinary consideration, the Human Resources team also had to evaluate the broader context of Smith's behavior and whether this incident reflected a recurring pattern. This required a closer look at his past conduct and interactions within the workplace.

Smith's behavior in the past included maintaining a relatively low profile and carrying out his duties. Despite his typically reserved demeanor, there was an incident when Smith's vehicle, bearing a 'Trump 2016' campaign sticker, became the subject of concern for two colleagues.

The reporting employees, noting the absence of comparable political displays among colleagues, expressed concern that the 'Trump 2016' sticker, while not directly offensive, contravened an implicit norm of workplace political neutrality and advocated for its removal to maintain a professional environment and prevent potential conflict. Smith was respectfully asked to remove the sticker and assist in preempting any issues that may arise; however, he denied the request. Smith's supervisor, Diane Peyton, was alerted on the issue, and she communicated with him highlighting the perceived impact of his behavior on the workplace environment. The discussion between the two outlined concerns regarding the potential for triggering emotional distress among colleagues, the risk of disrupting workplace harmony, and the potential negative

consequences for Smith's established professional relationships. In response, Smith articulated a divergent perspective, asserting his prerogative over his personal property, specifically his vehicle, and its adornment. He maintained that, in the absence of a direct policy prohibiting such displays, his decision to display the 'Trump 2016' sticker was within his rights. A few colleagues offered a solution to this issue suggesting that sticker be visible only on non-workdays, but Smith firmly resisted and reiterated his autonomy over his personal property.

Since no formal policy or barrier prohibited him from displaying his political affiliation—particularly on his vehicle—there was no immediate action that could be taken. In the following weeks, he began parking closer to the main entrance, a move that some colleagues interpreted as a deliberate attempt to flaunt his political views. Even though he didn't violate company policy, this behavior highlighted a lack of emotional intelligence and sensitivity. A note was made regarding his unwillingness to engage in a constructive dialogue or meet others halfway on an issue that remained emotionally charged following the 2016 presidential election. This incident became a rare but prime example of Smith's limited awareness of personal political expression and its impact on organizational climate.

Subsequently, Clara Thomas, Ethan Brown, and Diane convened to determine the appropriate disciplinary action related to the main issue – Smith's social media repost and comment. The discussion involved considering whether the repost was accidental, and thus potentially less severe than an original post, versus a deliberate act, given his subsequent reply. The group contemplated consequences such as formal warning or termination.

Both were potential options, and many aspects were weighed particularly overall performance, ongoing projects, and office behavior. In the end, it was decided that Redstone had a zero-tolerance policy for racist behavior and Smith was in clear violation of the company policy. Thus, he had to be terminated effective immediately.

EPILOGUE

The termination of Jared Smith prompted significant review within Redstone's Human Resources department and exposed systemic vulnerabilities. As a result, the Human Resources department took swift action to implement more training programs aimed at fostering diversity and inclusion in the workplace and taking steps to mitigate the probability of such incidents in the future. After Jared Smith's separation from the company, he didn't contact any of his coworkers. He left without offering an apology, and his social media activity decreased substantially. Smith was also blocked from posting on the company's social media page a couple weeks after his termination.

Note: The characters and names used in the case are all fictitious. The goal is to analyze management challenges instead of focusing on people or the company involved.

QUESTIONS

1. If you were in Theresa Williams's position and came across the social media post, what would you do?
2. Should companies encourage employees to share their political beliefs? Does it cause more harm than good?
3. Do you agree with the disciplinary actions taken by the Human Resources department given that the repost was made in his own time with no direct affiliation to the company? Why or why not?
4. Based on the five responses outlined in the Two-Dimensional Model of Conflict Behavior—forcing, accommodating, avoiding, compromising, and collaborating (Robbins & Judge, 2019)—which approach best characterizes Smith's response to the sticker incident? Provide a rationale for your answer using evidence from the case.
5. How might the company improve its response to prevent the recurrence of similar situations in the future?

6. At what point do Smith's actions described in this case cross the line between protecting an employee's freedom of expression and upholding workplace standards of respect, inclusion, and professionalism.
7. Based on the six steps in the decision-making process outlined by Whetten and Cameron (2016), did Clara Thomas and Ethan Brown follow the model effectively? Were any steps skipped, or was the sequence altered in addressing the situation?
8. According to Katz's framework of leadership skills—technical, human, and conceptual (Radtke, 2022)—which of these did HR Generalist, Clara Thomas, need to rely on most when managing and responding to the conflict involving Smith?
9. Which skill set is the most relevant to upper-level management and used in broad strategic situations?

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