

Leaders need to be schooled in social media

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USB-ED



From [US President Trump](#) and his random remarks on land expropriation in South Africa to an appalling tweet by [Adam Catzavelos](#) from a beach in Greece, social media has once again erupted into a vitriolic tempest. The message to leaders, be they presidents, CEOs or junior execs, should be clear: get smarter with social media so as not to cause harm.

In an age of rage, social signalling and online justice, leaders need to be schooled in the reputational ramifications of social media. Similarly to road-rage within the confines of a car, social media seems to make individuals feel separate, removed and safe from consequences. You're not talking directly to people; you're typing on a screen. Remember, we didn't commonly use smartphones till ten years ago. And Facebook is only 14 years old. Suffice to say we're new to social media. And never has a medium been less social.

The anonymity it brings means many people assume a false sense of privacy. We think we're whispering to a friend; in fact, we're amplifying our voices over a loudspeaker to the equivalent of hundreds of full football stadiums. There are lots of implications to this: bullies are likely to say things that expose them for who they really are. But the magnification of the gaze also means that any slip-ups are instant reputational stains for individuals and businesses – no matter how 'innocent' the mistake may be.

And that's why leaders need to learn fast. There are countless examples of smart senior execs saying questionable things on various social channels, with catastrophic consequences for their companies. One of the problems is that it's an immediate form of expression. It takes seconds to publish a thought. But one 'screen grab' and retweet later and you have yourself a viral social storm that's on record forever. Which is why businesses should invest in social media schooling for their staff at all levels.

Here are some basics 'social school' should cover:

1. **A leader is never seen as separate to his or her business:**

A recent tweet by the CEO of an insurance company is a case in point. He tweeted from his personal account but the company was immediately implicated – as was the company's majority stakeholder. A leader's irresponsible social behaviour has far-reaching ramifications for all stakeholders. Think of Musk as well. He pretty much is his brand – so his unfortunate 'pedo' tweet had implications for an already struggling Tesla.

2. **If you can't say it to someone's face...**

Before tweeting anything about someone or a group of people, a leader should consider what the response would be if he or she said it to the person/ people directly. It seems obvious but too few people put this into practice.

3. **If you can't say it to a full football stadium...**

Let's take it a step further. Before a leader puts anything on social media, he or she needs to imagine amplifying the message to a full football stadium. Still prepared to say it with 100 000 people listening?

4. **Sensitivity training is important:**

It's imperative that businesses have regular training sessions to encourage inclusivity and to help people navigate cross-cultural differences and personal preferences. Positively, people are becoming far more aware of and vocal about discrimination. It's imperative leaders are schooled in all sensitivities to avoid causing anyone harm on social media - and in life and the workplace in general.

5. **Words have consequences:**

If a leader is causing harm to others in any then there needs to be consequences. The board needs to hold the leader accountable and the right course of action needs to be decided on and quickly executed. Importantly, this needs to be communicated internally first. It's best for the business to take ownership and be honest and apologetic. By apologising to its stakeholders and the public, and efficiently and fairly dealing with the leader in question, a company can help to protect and rebuild its reputation.

6. **The value of values:**

Cascading a clear vision and values through a company regularly is the best way to get people's ongoing buy-in and to cement what a business stands for. Employees can – and should – be your primary ambassadors, but that means recognising that your people are your best asset and treating them as such. There is nothing as dangerous as a disgruntled employee, particularly in the age of social media. We're living in a time of extreme ethical consumerism. Never before have customers been so conscientious and thus conscious of a brand's values. So one Facebook post from a manager saying something contrary to what a business stands for is all it takes to cast the whole company into disrepute.

7. **Check before publishing:**

Leaders should consider asking other people to check social media posts they feel unsure of, before these go live. It also helps for leaders to be surrounded by people from different backgrounds, with varying perspectives. An echo chamber of 'yes' people who never challenge a person in charge's problematic opinions is how many companies come undone.

8. **Don't leave it to the interns:**

Social media is a tough gig. Too many businesses leave it up to the interns, often with damaging results. Be very careful of who has your company's social media logins.