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TALKING POINTS

Now that was expensive lunch

By Andrea Obston

Ron Schiller's big mouth and need to impress may have cost NPR more than \$400 million. That's the amount of federal funding that this motor mouth put in jeopardy with his remarks blasting conservatives.

What's the next step for NPR as it looks to salvage its reputation as a news source worthy of public support? Separation, self-examination and some serious employee retraining.

Anyone who works for an organization is seen (and rightly so) as a community ambassador. This is especially true for someone in Schiller's position as a fundraising official for the network. So pretending his remarks are purely personal is out of the question. But NPR does need to publicly state that he was not mouthing their values.

In its statement of purpose, NPR's website says: "Our coverage must be fair,



unbiased, accurate, complete and honest. At NPR we are expected to conduct ourselves in a manner that leaves no question about our independence and fairness. We must treat the people we cover and our audience with respect." Clearly Mr. Schiller missed that section of the site.

Whoever NPR sends out there to combat his statements had better have authority and credibility. They need to be someone we can trust who can unequivocally state that Schiller was not speaking on NPR's behalf. And since the network is currently leaderless, that's a problem (I'd vote for Nina Totenberg but clearly that violates a whole different set of ethics). That someone needs to cite the network's commitment to its core values and explain why what Schiller said doesn't jibe with them.

After that, this media organization needs to subject itself to its peers in the news business by aggressively going out on the talk show circuit. They need to reiterate their values and state what they are going to do to make sure everyone associated with them lives them. Then they need to back up those words with serious HR training.

When an employee violates an organization's policies on something like sexual

misconduct, it's time to retrain and reframe those policies so everyone lives them. Schiller's loud-mouth tirade is a similar situation. He violated NPR's core values and it's time everyone at the network gets a strong wake-up call about what they are.

All of us in business can take a lesson from that. How often do we pay attention to those lofty vision, missions and statements of purpose once we post them on our sites? How often do we make it clear to our employees they need to live them every time they walk through our doors?

In truth, the NPR incident is more of an HR issue than a PR issue. They've got to change the behavior of their employees and then use PR to publicly air what they did. One without the other is just empty talk and will go nowhere to rebuild credibility.

Loose cannons can and do sink your own ships. Time for NPR to reload, regroup and sail forward after some serious self examination. ■

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