



ARTICLES

- Latest News
- Volunteer Center
- Jobs: Post and Search
- SHRM Store

Bring it.
NEW SKILLS.
IDEAS.
TERMS.

Sign up for SHRM

- Email Newsletters ▾
- Available RSS Feeds ▾
- Webcasts ▾

SHRM's HR Jobs

Where HR Professionals Find HR Professionals

Search HR Jobs | Post HR Jobs

Text Size: S | M | L

SHRM » HR Disciplines » Diversity » Articles

Oops! What to Do When an Employee Says the Wrong Thing

2/9/2010 By Rebecca R. Hastings, SPHR

When an employee uses one of "those words"—a word that is perceived as derogatory by those from a particular racial, ethnic, religious or other demographic group—what should an organization do?

If it were up to one-time Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin, the answer would be clear: Get rid of him.

In a Feb. 1, 2010, Facebook posting, Palin blasted White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel for using the phrase "f---ing retarded" in an August strategy meeting involving representatives from liberal groups and White House aides.

The remark was made public in a Jan. 26, 2010, *Wall Street Journal* article.

"Just as we'd be appalled if any public figure of Rahm's stature ever used the 'N-word' or other such inappropriate language, Rahm's slur on all God's children with cognitive and developmental disabilities—and the people who love them—is unacceptable, and it's heartbreaking," Palin said in the posting, adding that President Barack Obama should "show decency" by "eliminating one member of that inner circle."

Yet *The Huffington Post* has reported that Palin has used "the R-word" herself, referring to her own son, Trig, who has Down syndrome, as her "retarded baby."

The Disability Community Reacts

On Jan. 26, 2010, Special Olympics Chairman and CEO Timothy Shriver sent a letter to the White House to familiarize Emanuel and his staff with "the suffering and pain that is perpetuated by the use of the terms 'retard' and 'retarded' ... which to our population is just as painful as any number of racial or ethnic slurs, jokes or taunts that society has committed to eradicating from our lexicon."

The letter, which was posted on the *Chicago Sun Times*' web site, continued: "Yet because people with intellectual disabilities continue to be the most neglected, underserved and discriminated against population on the planet, the R-word has not only remained in use, but it has become so pervasive in our society that most people find it acceptable to use as a synonym for 'stupid' or 'hapless' or to describe behavior that is considered less than ideal."

Shriver concluded by calling on Emanuel to join the "Spread the Word to End the Word" campaign by pledging not to say the R-word in the future.

March 3, 2010, is Spread the Word to End the Word awareness day, a grass-roots youth-focused campaign to collect 100,000 pledges from individuals who commit to doing their part to end use of the R-word. More than 55,000 pledges had been collected as of Feb. 4, 2010.

In response to the letter, Shriver and four others were invited to meet with Emanuel at the White House on Feb. 3, 2010.

Shriver and the other invitees—Andrew Imparato, president and CEO of the nonprofit American Association of People with Disabilities; Peter V. Berns, CEO of The ARC, a membership organization for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities; Hannah Jacobs, a parent of a child with a cognitive disability; Julie Petty, former president of Self Advocates Becoming Empowered; and Ricardo Thornton, a Special Olympics athlete—issued a statement following the meeting:

"We came here today to meet with Rahm Emanuel and share with him our view on the importance and impact of language. We wanted to invite Mr. Emanuel and all of America to understand the collective efforts of our community to remove the words 'retard' and 'retarded' from everyday speech," the statement began.

"The R-word is polluting our language," it continued. "Every day our community hears this word—in schools and workplaces, in print and in movies, on radio and television. And every day they suffer its dehumanizing effects—mockery, stigma, ridicule. This is a word that is incredibly damaging—not only to the seven million people with intellectual disabilities, but also their friends, family and to all of us."

The statement confirmed that Emanuel had apologized "for his mistake and the pain it caused in our community," had pledged to end the use of the R-word, and had committed to examine pending legislation to remove the R-word from federal law.

"Our community has earned the right to be respected instead of ridiculed," the statement concluded. "We have suffered injustice for generations, and we are demanding that it end."

A Firing Offense?

HR and diversity experts consulted for this article disagreed with Palin's solution.

"If we fired each person who made such an error in judgment, who would be left?" asked Nadine O. Vogel, president of Springboard Consulting LLC, a firm specializing in connecting businesses to

Tools

- Print this page
- Email to a friend

MBA WITH A CONCENTRATION IN HUMAN CAPITAL MANAGEMENT

PH.D. IN HUMAN CAPITAL MANAGEMENT

LEARNING FROM THE THOUGHT LEADER IN HUMAN CAPITAL MANAGEMENT

BELLEVUE UNIVERSITY
Real Learning for Real Life

List jobs for free at thousands of locations.

individuals with disabilities, in an e-mail interview. We would have fired our own president," she added, referring to an earlier remark by President Obama linking his lack of skill at bowling to the Special Olympics.

Though Vogel noted that Emanuel's apology was appropriate and timely, she expressed concern over the flippant manner in which the word was used. "It is really no different than someone saying, 'He's so gay,'" she told *SHRM Online*. "My bigger concern is that these words are coming out of the mouths of our country's leaders, those who should be serving as role models.

"Words are hurtful to individuals, to people with real feelings," she added, and for some the hurt has a lasting impact on their self-esteem.

Vogel said she has spent years trying to undo the impact words such as stupid, retard, dumb and freak have had on her daughters, Gretchen, 18, who has a neuromuscular disorder and learning disabilities, and Rachel, 10, who has a learning disability and a heart condition.

Gretchen is a freshman at the local community college studying to be an elementary school teacher, she noted.

Vogel is no stranger to hurtful comments in the workplace. When co-workers learned she had given birth to a beautiful baby girl with Down syndrome, they expressed sympathy and asked things like "Didn't you have an amnio?" and "Why are you back at work? Shouldn't you be home taking care of your baby?" instead of congratulating her.

"If an HR professional was to hear about and/or witness a senior executive say or do something inappropriate relative to disability, I would see it as a 'coachable moment' to immediately but privately address the issue, what was said [and] why it was inappropriate," Vogel said. She recommends that organizations provide disability etiquette and awareness training that is delivered in a comfortable, welcoming and relevant manner.

Valda Boyd Ford, CEO of the Center for Human Diversity Inc., a Bellevue, Neb., consulting firm, agreed. She described the incident as "regrettable" but added: "If every person who made a politically incorrect statement was fired, we would spend all of our time hiring and firing.

"I cannot envision firing anyone for a one-time offense," she continued. "We are made better by forgiving people for a misstep rather than firing them."

A better strategy, she said, is to educate those in authority about cultural competence so they are better able to avoid "linguistic faux pas."

"It's not the word that is offensive," according to Tim O'Brien, a communications consultant and owner of O'Brien Communications. "Many words that have the potential to cause controversy were once considered a better substitute for an even more archaic term." For example, he said, people with disabilities currently abhor words like crippled, handicapped, mute, infirm, special and challenged.

"What happens with language, however, is that certain words take on negative connotations as they are misused in society," he explained. "Retarded" is one of those words because for many years it has been used as an insult among people without mental or intellectual disabilities.

"Words matter," he told *SHRM Online*. "The wrong words can make people with disabilities feel excluded or ostracized in their work or living environments."

That's why those with mental or intellectual disabilities should be described as people first, such as "people with cognitive disabilities," "people with learning disabilities" or "people with Down syndrome," he said.

Moving Forward

Johnny C. Taylor Jr., author of *The Trouble with HR: An Insider's Guide to Finding and Keeping the Best People* (AMACOM, 2009) and former chair of the Society for Human Resource Management, recalled two instances in which senior executives at his company said the wrong thing. One used a slur to refer to a lesbian employee; another said veteran employees "were all 'crazy' and 'dangerous' after having fought in wars."

"HR practitioners in this situation have a dual responsibility to the employees subjected to inappropriate and illegal comments but also to the shareholders of the corporation whose investment in the firm could be impacted by protracted litigation and the attendant negative public relations," he told *SHRM Online*. In addition to explaining the legal predicament the executive might have created, Taylor said, he tried to connect with the individuals in question on a personal level to explain why the comment was "morally wrong and unnecessary."

In a Feb. 4, 2010, blog posting, Brian McNaught, a diversity consultant who specializes in training on gay and transgender issues in the workplace, wrote: "Even in the very best companies, some manager in some office, some salesperson, some teller, some flight attendant, some human resources person, or some attorney is going to screw up, say something stupid and embroil the company in a controversy over discrimination. What matters most is what the company does with the screwup."

When asked during a Feb. 3, 2010, White House press briefing why the Special Olympics' Shriver was meeting with Emanuel, Deputy White House Press Secretary Bill Burton said, "I believe it's to talk about issues of mutual concern and a little bit about the incident that happened.

"He has apologized," Burton added. "And we're all just moving forward."

Rebecca R. Hastings, *SPHR*, is an online editor/manager for *SHRM*.

Related Articles:

Attitudes on Hiring Those with Disabilities Have Shifted—Slowly, *SHRM Online Diversity Discipline*, Sept. 4, 2009

Disability Inclusion Requires Common Sense, *SHRM Online Diversity*

Interested in this topic? Learn more at these SHRM 62nd Annual Conference & Exposition sessions, to be held in late June 2010 in San Diego:

*Disabling Misconceptions: Disability in the Workplace

*ADA: The Next Generation

[Learn more about this event](#)

SPONSORED LINKS

[Effectively Manage Your Employee Time](#)

Software & hardware allow you to integrate time tracking & payroll. View a 5-min demonstration here.

www.MyTimeForce.com

[Top Performance Review Software](#)

Align goals, track performance year round,easy reviews-Free Demo & Resources

www.sonicperform.com

[HR Degree Programs](#)

Advance Your HR Career. Search All HR Programs Now.

www.BuildACareer.net

[Employee Engagement Surveys](#)

Improve Business Performance While Improving the Workplace. Call Now!

www.ScarlettSurveys.com

[Online Harassment Prevention Training](#)

Award winning,cost effective training solutions tailored for your workplace.

www.HRTtrain.com

[Buy a Link Now](#)

[ABOUT SHRM](#)

[HR DISCIPLINES](#)

[LEGAL ISSUES](#)

[TEMPLATES AND TOOLS](#)

[PUBLICATIONS](#)

[RESEARCH](#)

[EDUCATION](#)

[CONFERENCES](#)

[COMMUNITIES](#)

[ADVOCACY](#)

[Contact Us](#) [Copyright](#) [Terms of Use](#) [Privacy Updated](#) [RSS](#) [Advertise](#) [Careers with SHRM](#) [HR Vendor Directory](#) [HR Certification Institute](#) [SHRM Foundation](#) [SHRM India](#)



Society for Human Resource Management

1800 Duke Street
Alexandria, Virginia
22314 USA

Phone US Only:

[\(800\) 283-SHRM](tel:+18002835440)

Phone International:

[+1 \(703\) 548-3440](tel:+17035483440)

TTY/TDD

[\(703\) 548-6999](tel:+17035486999)

Fax: (703) 535-6490

Questions? [Contact SHRM](#)
[Careers](#) [Careers @ SHRM](#)