How to Avoid Losing Your Job Like Tim Wolfe

An unusual story with compelling leadership issues is playing out today at the University of Missouri. Student protestors have been calling for the university president, Tim Wolfe, to resign for his weak response to a repeated series of racial attacks on campus. Today, he did just that. 

Thirty members of the football team were refusing to participate in practices this week or to play against Brigham Young University on Saturday unless Wolfe stepped down. Forfeiting the game would have cost the university up to one million dollars.

The racial incidents have ranged from an alleged incident where someone painted a swastika in feces in a dorm room bathroom, people shouting the N-word at African American students, and one incident where protestors surrounded Wolfe's car and he remained silent in the face of the protest. One African American grad student, Jonathan Butler, even staged a hunger strike, vowing to reject food until Wolfe resigns.

Wolfe had promised a dialogue, but students assert that the school has been promising such dialogues since 2011 and they have seen no changes.

While this charged conflict plays out, what can you do as a leader to avoid such a fate? Here are our suggestions:

1. Any alleged harassment based on race, ethnic background, gender or other protected characteristics should be investigated immediately by experienced and unbiased outside investigators. An appropriate summary of their findings should be given to relevant parties and the organization at large.

2. Be proactive. Before you end up in Wolfe's situation, conduct effective training about harassment and discrimination with students, employees and leaders.

3. Make sure that leaders walk the talk. You should immediately speak out against harassment and discrimination and make sure that you and other leaders do not engage in even the most subtle forms of such conduct.

4. Engage in diversity outreach throughout the organization. Research shows the these incidents diminish for organizations that have strong diversity efforts as well as a diverse leadership and management.
There is a solution to these terrible incidents. It's your legal as well as your moral responsibility to prevent them. We can help through training, consulting and investigations.

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