

Prank or discrimination? Taming your ‘animal house’

by Boyd A. Byers

It could have been a scene from *Animal House*, but the events took place in a real firehouse, not a fictitious fraternity house.

Did the dalmatian go hungry?

Tennie Pierce, a Los Angeles, California, firefighter, sat down in the station kitchen to enjoy a spaghetti dinner. He took a large bite, he says, when he noticed the other firefighters laughing and making barking noises. After taking a second bite, he demanded to know what was in his food. No one would tell him, so he walked out of the kitchen with his coworkers still laughing. He later learned his spaghetti had been laced with canned dog food.

Pierce didn't think the prank was funny. He thought it was discrimination, so he sued, alleging racial harassment and discrimination. He claimed he suffered retaliation for reporting the incident and verbal slurs, insults, taunts, and derogatory remarks.

A fire department investigation suggested the incident was a prank intended to humble Pierce after he referred to himself as “Big Dog” during a fire station volleyball game and wasn't racially motivated. But a sociologist said the prank was intended to “humiliate and dehumanize” Pierce and “keep blacks out by making their lives so miserable that they don't want to stay.”

After the city council approved a \$2.7 million settlement to Pierce, photos of him participating in firehouse hazing pranks surfaced on the Internet. The pictures appear to show him roughhousing, pouring a liquid on coworkers, and looking on as bare-chested firefighters are taped down to chairs and smeared with what looks like food substances. In late November 2006, the mayor vetoed the settlement. Pierce's lawsuit now is headed to trial. The fire chief is headed out the door, announcing amid the scandal that he will retire on January 1.

Thank you, sir, may I have another?

So what's the harm in a few “harmless pranks” at work? It doesn't take a genius to figure out that bad things happen when the jokes involve physical horseplay, demeaning hazing, and dog-food dinners. But what about more routine workplace joking? Humor at work can curb stress and create a sense of fun and camaraderie. A little, or even a lot, of play at work can be a good thing. But there must be boundaries. Jokes directed toward an employee because of her race, gender, religion, or disability are obviously a no-no.

Humor also is inappropriate when it's targeted at one person or a small group in a way that demeans them or separates them from the rest of the employees. The nut of the

matter is this: Will the joke cause another employee to feel belittled, offended, or threatened or contribute to an uncomfortable or hostile work environment? Even if there was no discriminatory or other improper intent on the part of the jokester, excessive or inappropriate joking can lead to lawsuits if the recipient perceives it otherwise. Legal issues aside, teasing can create tension, division, and distraction, impairing morale and impeding productivity.

There's no place in the workplace for initiation rituals of the kind depicted in *Animal House*. Some of you might remember the case last year in which an employer was sued after a manager spanked a female employee with a paddle (bare-bottomed, no less) for not making sales goals. As you might guess, those situations never turn out well for the employer. Even if you win the lawsuit, you still lose because you have to pay your lawyers and endure the bad publicity and disruption to your business. There are good reasons schools have cracked down on bullying and fraternities have banned hazing.

Make a resolution to get out of your cubicle or office so you can see, hear, and ask what's going on in the work areas. Put the kibosh on hazing, horseplay, and inappropriate joking. Make sure your supervisors know where the company stands on the issue and that they're expected to do the same. To paraphrase *Animal House* nemesis Dean Wormer, "The time has come for someone to put his foot down . . . and that foot is you."

He said it

"Common sense and a sense of humor are the same thing, moving at different speeds. A sense of humor is just common sense, dancing."

— William James