

by Boyd Byers

The Catbert of Catfish Bend

Call it the Great Comic Caper. Call it a case of art imitating life imitating art. Call it whatever you want, but see the humor and the lesson in the humor.

Pointy-haired bosses

The story begins at the Catfish Bend Casino in Burlington, Iowa. David Steward, a security adviser who had worked for the company for seven years, posted a *Dilbert* comic strip on an office bulletin board. (For the uninitiated, *Dilbert* is famous for satirizing managerial incompetence and features characters such as the Pointy-Haired Boss and Catbert, the evil HR director.)

In the comic, Dilbert and a garbage man have the following conversation:

Dilbert: Why does it seem as if most of the decisions in my workplace are made by drunken lemurs?

Man: Decisions are made by people who have time, not people who have talent.

Dilbert: Why are talented people so busy?

Man: They're fixing the problems made by people who have time.

That's funny. But the bosses at Catfish Bend didn't find it funny. So they reviewed surveillance tapes and fingered Steward as the culprit. Steward admitted he did it. He explained that he was trying to improve morale in light of upcoming layoffs. Management told him he wasn't a "team player" and fired him.

Catbert, the evil HR director

But the story doesn't end there. Catfish Bend made the inspired decision to contest Steward's unemployment. Its HR director, Steve Morley, testified at the hearing. He explained that the casino fired Steward because upper management found the cartoon offensive. "Basically, he was accusing the decision-makers of being drunken lemurs," Morley said. "We consider that misconduct when you insult your employer."

“I thought maybe it would cheer some people up,” Steward said in his defense. “I found it humorous.”

The administrative law judge (ALJ) ruled in Steward’s favor and awarded him unemployment benefits. She found that while posting the comic strip may have been “a good-faith error in judgment,” it wasn’t intentional misbehavior. The case became national news after an Iowa newspaper reported on the hearing.

Dilbert’s revenge

But the story doesn’t end there, either. *Dilbert* cartoonist Scott Adams learned about Steward’s firing. And knowing good comic fodder when he saw it, he wrote a series of strips describing Steward’s ordeal.

One strip read:

Catbert: Wally, I have to fire you for posting a comic comparing managers to drunken lemurs. You won’t be eligible for unemployment benefits unless you can prove you were stupid as opposed to malicious. Can you prove you’re stupid?

Wally: Is there another explanation for working here?

Steward seemed to enjoy his 15 minutes of fame, but he’s still unemployed. He said he’s heard that all the negative attention surrounding his firing affected the casino’s business. Morley and Catfish Bend declined to comment about the matter.

Lessons

What can you take away from all this? First, have a sense of humor. Second, have a sense of perspective. Finally, have some sense.

Sure, your employees are at will, and you can fire them at any time for any or no reason. But firing a seven-year employee for posting a relatively harmless comic? Come on. A verbal or written warning would have made the point. And know when to let the unemployment go. If employees start to view your workplace as a *Dilbert* comic strip — with humorless, incompetent management and an evil, Catbert-like HR department — you’re going to have morale, retention, and perhaps even legal troubles.

They said it

If I thought I would get the same results as I did that time, no. I hope to work somewhere that has a sense of humor.

— Dave Steward, when asked whether he will ever post a *Dilbert* comic strip at work again.

I'm considering putting a warning on the strip, something along the lines of "Dilbert comics can injure your career, but only if your boss is a humorless turd."

— Scott Adams