

HR's HR problem

A P.T. Barnum quote posted to a manager's door in City Hall struck African-American employees as insensitive

BY SCOTT THOMAS ANDERSON / scotta@newsreview.com

Two years after drawing fire from the NAACP for alleged discrimination, the city of Sacramento's human resources department is again being accused of having a human resources problem.

The latest dust-up for city HR officials came in September when the African American Employee Leadership Council, or AAELC, emailed City Manager Howard Chan. AAELC was formed to advocate for the fair treatment of black employees at City Hall, who comprise only a small percentage of its managers and workforce. In an email obtained by SN&R, AAELC representatives told Chan that some employees had been offended by "an inappropriate and offensive sign" posted on the office door of Shelley Banks-Robinson, the city's human resources director.

The sign featured a portrait of 19th century showman P.T. Barnum, with a quote by him that read, "Wait a minute ... This IS my circus and those ARE my monkeys!"

AAELC's message spelled out why its members were upset.

"Historically, African-Americans have been referred to as monkeys. In this context the term is viewed as a derogatory reference and ethnic slur,"

AAELC's letter stated. "This comment is commonly used to disparage and intimidate African-Americans. Furthermore, research has shown P.T. Barnum was a racist and he bought and sold Blacks much like he displayed animals in his circus. P.T. Barnum also performed in black face."

In Chan's response to AAELC, also obtained by SN&R, the city manager said that he'd determined the offense was unintentional.

"After direct consultation with Director Shelley Banks-Robinson, we found that the sign referenced in your previous email was placed there by another HR employee whose intent was to communicate the level and amount of work that Director Banks-Robinson is engaged in," Chan wrote on September 17. "That person did not purposefully mean to be biased toward any individual, group, or community of staff/personnel, although the sign could be viewed as such."

**"This IS
my circus and
those ARE my
monkeys!"**

**Quotation attributed
to P.T. Barnum**

AAELC representatives did not return calls or emails for further comment. However, their message to the city manager had in fact acknowledged that the incident might have been unintentional, but stressed a broader concern about how such a meme could appear for any length of time on the director of human resources' door.

"Posting it shows a lack of judgment," AAELC told Chan.

The employee group then raised a structural issue within the city's human resources department, specifically that the Office of Civil Rights (now called the Equal Employment Opportunity Division) has a direct reporting relationship to the Office of

Labor Relations. The EEOC handles sensitive investigations, and Labor

Relations is an upper division of human resources that handles disciplinary issues. In this case, the leadership of HR is directly involved in AAELC's complaint. AAELC's letter called this situation a clear conflict of interest.

Chan's response explained why that structure won't be changing.

"It has been determined that [the Equal Employment Opportunity Division]'s seamless coordination and alignment with the Labor Relations Department is needed to effectively address complaints in a timely and substantive manner," he wrote.

This week, city communications manager Tim Swanson emphasized that there are processes in place to make sure the HR department is policed like any other department.

"The city of Sacramento takes complaints from its employees about discrimination, harassment and other issues very seriously," Swanson said, adding that investigations are done "thoroughly, fairly and with integrity."

The P.T. Barnum incident wasn't the first time Sacramento's HR department faced scrutiny. In 2016, an HR analyst filed a complaint against her supervisors with the state Department of Fair Housing and Employment, alleging she'd been singled out for unfair disciplinary actions based on her race. □



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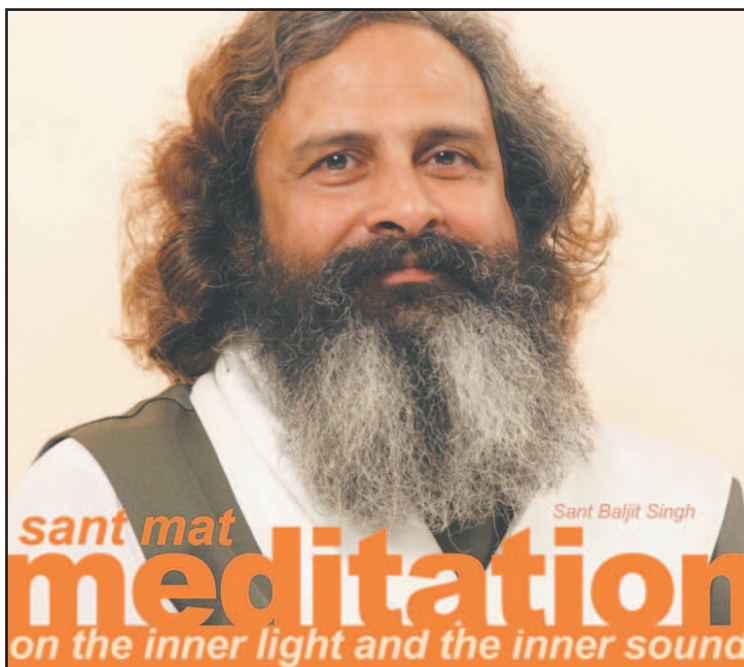
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