

What a CEO's verbal gaffe wrought

Four years into the job, the CEO of a chain of day care centers had revitalized the company's finances, but his verbal gaffes threatened to drive away customers and staff.

That became clear when, on a tour with a potential funder of grants for families in need, the CEO blurted out a series of insensitive remarks—remarks particularly insensitive for a preschool.

After the tour, the incredibly warm representative for the funder said, "It was lovely." Intensely, as though he didn't understand, the CEO wanted to know, "What was lovely about it?"

Remaining gracious, the funder's rep complimented the employees. "We pay them," the CEO responded. "What else?"

The capper came when the rep praised the center's lactation rooms as "a stroke of brilliance." To this the CEO replied, "The moms do like them. What gets me, though, is how long some of these kids nurse. If they're old enough to ask for a Coke, it's time to move on."

The next day, the local newspaper, which had been invited on the tour, ran a raging editorial on that last comment.

The board now has three choices: issue a stern warning to the CEO and have him make a full-throated apology; find others to serve as the public face of the company; and/or start searching for a new chief with a humane, caring and child-centered leadership style.

— Adapted from ["The CEO Who Couldn't Keep His Foot Out of His Mouth,"](#) Lisa Burrell, *Harvard Business Review*.