

Did Starbucks fail at communicating policy?

Recently, Starbucks took it on the chin when employees in Philadelphia acted in a manner that suggested there was one set of rules for white patrons and another for black patrons.

Whatever the employees may have been thinking or trying to accomplish, the public was swift to judge. Protests and boycotts followed. CEO Kevin Johnson announced that on May 29, it will close 8,000 U.S. company-owned stores to conduct racial-bias training to address the issue.

It's likely that the Starbucks incidents reveal some form of discriminatory animus on the part of individual employees. But from a management and HR perspective, there is another layer.

Was what happened at Starbucks the result of a vague policy—perhaps about loitering—that was misinterpreted in ways that no one imagined it could be?

In your organization, you should always be asking these questions:

1. How might the wording of our policies be misperceived, or even exploited?
2. Have we thought of the ways that the policy could be challenged, and how we would respond to them?
3. Do all employees have the same understanding of these policies?
4. Have policies been stress-tested? That is, has anything ever gone wrong to make us take a second look at them?

When it comes to writing and enforcing policies, words on a page only provide the illusion of security and order. Meanwhile, what do those words actually mean to the front-liners tasked with interpreting policies during the normal course of business?