

Racism

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Marta Kopke was the public relations manager for the state transportation agency. The agency moves more than 100,000 people a day to and from the City, and Marta's department communicates to customers and news media. Most of the work is alerts on travel disruptions, schedule changes, fare hikes and leaflets distributed on trains and busses that discussed improvements to rail and bus lines and promotions. On average, twice a year, she dealt with a derailment or bus accident that became a news cycle lead.

Kopke was surprised then when she got a call from a local ABC TV reporter asking about a conductor named Tommy Thompson on the Branham line. Kopke had little to do with conductors. They are union employees, and their issues are handled by the local and Human Relations department. The reporter said an African-American woman charged Thompson with racism and inappropriate remarks to her. Further, the woman alleged pervasive discrimination against people of color on the Branham line. Kopke said she would investigate and call the reporter back.

One part of the reporter's remarks made little sense. About 40 percent of the conductors on the agency's rail lines were African-American. It was unlikely there was an atmosphere of discrimination. Kopke called the head of HR, told her of the reporter's call and gave her Thompson's name. The head of HR asked how the reporter knew about the incident. Kopke regretted that she had failed to ask.

The HR head filled her in. An African-American woman accused Tommy Thompson, a 30-year veteran on the Branham line, of using racial epithets to her. The woman was sitting in the "quiet car" of a 5:17 pm train to the suburbs. (A quiet car bans use of cell phones and loud talking but not soft conversation.) Thompson was seated across from the woman, and he was talking to a passenger. She asked Thompson to stop talking. Thompson said he was permitted to speak. The woman said he wasn't. The argument escalated. The woman said she was going to report him. Thompson gave her his name and said she could go ahead, then the woman alleged that Thompson used racial epithets. The woman did report Thompson who was suspended pending a discipline hearing. In the meantime, three letters came from passengers who witnessed the altercation, all of whom said the woman was at fault and not Thompson. Thompson was cleared of using epithets but charged with handling a customer incident badly. His boss gave him a week suspension without pay. Neither Thompson nor the woman was satisfied. Thompson asked his union local to appeal the suspension. It appeared the woman had contacted the reporter.

Kopke called the operations manager to inform him of the situation. He said he would investigate and to avoid calling the reporter back. Three hours later, the operations manager called. There appeared to be no use of racial epithets. Thompson and the woman were in a dispute over the meaning of "quiet car." Thompson was disciplined for

handling the affair badly. The operations manager told Kopke to tell the reporter there was nothing to the incident.

Kopke dialed the TV reporter and relayed the information. The reporter told her the woman's church was organizing a demonstration at the Whitewood station for the following afternoon to demand the conductor be fired. The church had alerted the media and was passing out handbills in Whitewood with the allegations and a recounting of the incident that was at odds with what Kopke had just stated. The reporter would attend the demonstration.

Kopke called the operations manager.

"We need to get ahead of this or we will be fighting it for days."

"What do you suggest?"

"We need a statement."

"Won't that add fuel to the fire? There's nothing to this incident. The woman is playing the 'race' card."

"We don't know that. The media won't be talking to the passengers. It will be 'he-said-she-said.'" Fifty people with signs at the station will be a media photo op."

The operations manager "conferenced in" the general counsel and head of HR.

"We can't name the conductor," said the legal counsel. "That will violate his privacy and upset the union. We can give facts without names."

"How do I handle the demonstration?" asked Kopke.

"Use Cece," said head of HR. Cecilia Graham was the no. 2 manager in the HR department and an African-American.

"Does Cece have media experience?"

"She holds her own in meetings. We can train her this afternoon."

It was agreed that Kopke would release a statement immediately then accompany Graham to Whitewood for the evening rush hour to meet with demonstrators and reporters. The statement and the two of them would make the following points:

- The state transportation agency deplores racism and does not countenance it in any employees.
- There was a verbal altercation between a conductor and an African-American woman.

- Witnesses said there was no use of racial epithets during the altercation.
- The conductor was disciplined for handling the altercation badly and suspended without pay for a week.
- The case was closed.

That night the 11pm news carried an interview with the African-American woman. The woman said she had been humiliated and taunted by the conductor. The reporter then interviewed the woman's pastor who said his church would be at the station to denounce the conductor and the state transportation agency. The story mentioned the agency's statement in passing.

At 11:30 pm, Kopke received a call from the head of HR.

"Cece is out for tomorrow. She is uncomfortable doing it. She knows the pastor and thinks he is a good guy. You'll have to handle it alone."

Kopke called the operations manager. He agreed to accompany her to the demonstration and to take media questions.

The demonstration was orderly. There were hand-made signs denouncing racism, chanting through bullhorns and three local TV stations present along with a regional newspaper reporter, the Whitewood web page correspondent and onlookers, most of whom were white. Passengers disembarking from the first rush-hour train seemed confused by the demonstrators. Most pushed through the crowd. Some stopped to inquire what the protest was about. Kopke and the operations manager standing to the side of the crowd noticed a few talking to the media. When the 5:17 pm train arrived, a white passenger disembarked and began arguing loudly with the demonstrators. He claimed he had witnessed the incident, and there were no racial epithets used. He said the woman was at fault and the protest was disgraceful. He sought out the TV reporters and repeated his remarks while praising the conductor.

Neither the operations manager nor Kopke had been interviewed yet. The operations manager turned to Kopke.

"Let's leave."

"Why?"

"That passenger handled the incident."

Kopke was opposed. She felt the operations manager should deliver the points from the statement, especially the first one.

"If there were no racial epithets then what have we got to say?"

"We want to make the case that we are opposed to any form of racism."

“I’m not sure we need to.”

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Questions to discuss:

1. Was Kopke correct in insisting that the operations manager deplore racism to the media?
2. Did the passenger make the case for the state transportation agency?
3. Was the state transportation agency wrong in trying to use Graham as a counter to the demonstrators?
4. What would you have done in handling this incident?