



The Day the Music Died

Career Development



This is my last column for the *Docket*.

After almost 10 years, I am setting aside my typewriter and correction fluid to make room for a younger, smarter in-house lawyer. And, most likely, it will be a lawyer who has never used a typewriter and thinks that correction fluid is an item sold at an auto parts store.

Writing for the *Docket* has been a satisfying and fun experience. I want to continue, but I really have to stop. My muse has died.

Not figuratively; he literally died. On September 18, 2016, Edward Mike Davis passed away at the age of 85.

You may not have heard of Mike. As a confident young man, he began his professional life as a chauffeur for a rich widow in Colorado. He married his employer, who was twice his age, and they divorced 12 years later. Mike took his divorce settlement, bought the Tiger Oil Company, and transformed himself into a stereotypical Texas oil magnate. "Tiger Mike" led his company through difficult times, but it never truly flourished. The experience would culminate in bankruptcy in the early 1980s.

Before his company failed, however, Mike recorded his business philosophy in employee memos. With carefully crafted, typewritten notes, he provided timeless lessons to corporate leaders everywhere. Here are just a few excerpts:

Idle conversation and gossip in this office among employees will result in immediate termination.... DO YOUR JOB AND KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT!

Anyone who lets their hair grow below their ears to where I can't see their ears means they don't wash. If they don't wash, they stink, and if they stink, I don't want the **** around me.

Don't speak to me when you see me. If I want to speak to you, I will do so. I want to save my throat. I don't want to ruin it by saying hello to all you ****.

[T]here will be no more birthday celebrations, birthday cakes, levity, or celebrations of any kind within the office. This is a business office.

I swear, but since I am the owner of this company, that is my privilege, and this privilege is not to be interpreted as the same for any employee. That differentiates me from you, and I want to keep it that way.

Ah, yes, just reading these quips warms the cockles. And these are some of the more restrained excerpts.

Tiger Mike's memos make us smile because they are so outlandish (and because he is not our boss). There is no subtlety, no spin, and no compassion. He was smart enough to recognize those traits but wanted nothing to do with them.

Thirty years after Tiger Oil collapsed, Mike voluntarily offered his memos up for publication. He did not try to color his flaws. He wanted to be seen and remembered for who he really was. And with this gift, Mike offers us three important lessons, although probably not the ones he intended.

First: don't be like Mike. There are some successful managers who enjoy speaking in a rude, unfiltered manner, but they are an exception. Most are medicated to ensure behavioral compliance. You will not succeed if you mimic Tiger Mike.

Second: Know yourself. Mike clearly did. If there is one piece of advice that I appreciate more than any other, it is that professional success requires strong self-awareness.

The third lesson, however, is the one that Mike did not appreciate, and may have contributed to the failure of his business: When you identify your weaknesses, correct them if you can, and compensate for them if you cannot. Self-awareness is a gift that is easily wasted.

Mike did not bother to hide any of his flaws. He had no apparent interest in self-improvement and seemed to enjoy the role of a caustic boss. His persona was hard, uncaring, and unsympathetic; exactly as he intended.

But we know better. As managers, we recognize the value of humility and the power of empathy. The memos of Edward Mike Davis prove why self-awareness isn't enough. We have to use that knowledge to improve.

Which is why this is my last column. I have just enough self-awareness to know when to stop.

If you want to enjoy more of Tiger Mike's wit and insight, visit the website lettersofnote.com.

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